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DIFFERENCE MAKERS: A MULTI-CASE STUDY OF THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH  
SUPERINTENDENTS BUILD EQUITABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS TO SUPPORT  
BLACK STUDENTS

by

Nicole Jones

A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in Urban Education

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

August 2016

## ABSTRACT

### DIFFERENCE MAKERS: A MULTI-CASE STUDY OF THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH SUPERINTENDENTS BUILD EQUITABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS TO SUPPORT BLACK STUDENTS

by

Nicole Jones

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016  
Under the Supervision of Professor Dr. Barbara Bales

The purpose of this study was to analyze the stories shared by superintendents in a Midwestern state about how they approached the work of developing more equitable learning environments for Black students. The study examined the dispositions of the superintendents, the actions taken by the superintendents in each school district, and the influence of the district environment on the superintendents' ability to carry out their work. A qualitative, multiple case study approach was used to conduct interviews and gather public documents and data from eight superintendents working in academically high performing, suburban school districts. The findings revealed that the eight superintendents possessed dispositions in alignment with the teachers and leaders identified in the research and literature on Culturally Relevant Practices. The superintendents' actions focused on increased engagement with Black families, challenging the status quo in the educational system, and educating teachers, students and community members on Culturally Relevant Practices. The political climate of the district and issues of White Privilege factored the superintendents' ability to carry out the work of creating equitable learning environments for Black students. Future studies should consider the examination of superintendent preparation

programs as it relates to the development of culturally relevant dispositions and actions and the interactions between superintendents leading work around equity and their relationships with their school board and community members.

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To the underdogs:

That they will have educators that lift them up  
and provide them with every opportunity to succeed

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

So many friends and family members ask me how long I have been working through a doctoral program. While the technical answer is somewhere around five years, in reality this work has been in development since I first stepped through the kindergarten doors of Willow Creek. I have had the great privilege of being nurtured throughout my educational career by my parents, extended family, my teachers, my professors and my colleagues.

I would like to thank my teachers. Mrs. Hendricks, my kindergarten teacher, for first turning me on to a love of learning and discovery. To my high school biology teacher Mr. Chuck Ritzenthaler whose passion for teaching and dedication to his students inspired me to become an educator. To my English teacher Mr. Bill Gay who shaped me into the writer I am today. And to my Spanish teacher, mentor and colleague Pat Pehoski who provided me with a wealth of encouragement, unconditional friendship and support as I transitioned from student to teacher and to administrator

I want to thank my professors at UW Milwaukee with whom I have spent the last decade of my educational studies. To my committee members Dr. Elise Frattura and Dr. Rajeswari Swaminathan for providing a critical eye to my work. To Dr. Thandeka Chapman, Dr. Sandra Pucci and Dr. Latish Reed who inspired me to challenge the status quo in education and explore the process of education in a critical way. To Dr. Decoteau Irby who took me on as a doctoral student, challenged my way of thinking, and pushed me to become a stronger researcher. To Dr. Leigh Wallace who supported me through my journey into educational leadership. And to Dr. Barbara Bales who has supported and coached me through the last leg of my dissertation and who helped strengthen my abilities as a writer throughout my masters and doctoral program.

To my Aunt Theresa with whom I spent many of my childhood weekends. She often referred to me as an “over achiever” and told me I would be a doctor one day. While I think she meant medical doctor, I think this is a fairly close second.

To my parents who did not have the same educational opportunities as I did and who put in hours of work under challenging conditions to support my sisters and me. They inspired and encouraged me to become the first student in our family to attend college. I am forever grateful for their words of support throughout my educational journey and the love and nurturing I received from them each and every day of my life.

Finally to my husband, Eron Jones, who, through multiple job changes and endless hours of work, continues to support my educational pursuits and career aspirations. I am so very lucky to have found someone with such patience, understanding and unconditional love. He has been a champion of my work and my biggest support system through the most difficult of days. I would not be in the position without him for so many reasons.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction of the Study**

Public education in the United States is rife with buzz phrases like “digital learning,” “differentiation,” and “common core,” but one phrase that may attract the most buzz in both the realm of research and in school district strategic plans is “achievement gap.” Tyrone Howard (2010) defines “achievement gap” as:

The discrepancy in educational outcomes between various student groups, namely African American, Native American, certain Asian American, and Latino students on the low end of the performance scale, and primarily White and various Asian American students at the higher end of the academic performance scale. (p.10)

Educational researchers and psychologists have studied the differences in learning outcomes between the groups described by Howard (2010) for well over a century equating the gap to a variety of factors including genetics, culture, socioeconomic status, and inequity in educational environments (Darling-Hammond, 2010, Friedman, 1978; Howard, 2010; James 2012; Jensen, 1969; Madyun, 2011; Ogbu, 1990; Schockley, 1972). During the beginning years of my doctoral coursework I also immersed myself in this issue, but over time my understanding of the achievement gap, where it comes from, and its impact on learning has evolved.

### **Researcher Background**

Both my studies as a doctoral student as well as by my experiences as a teacher have shaped my view of the achievement gap issue. During my fourth year as a high school teacher an opportunity arose that allowed me to examine issues of inequality between White and Black students within the school district where I taught. The Department of Public Instruction in my state had targeted our district as being in need of improvement due to a disproportionate number

of special education referrals for students of color. This required the district to participate in a program known as CREATE or Culturally Responsive Education for All: Training and Enhancement. CREATE training, now a defunct program in the state due to political backlash (Olson, 2013), was a one to two year program in which staff members of a school district attended monthly learning sessions centered around the examination of White privilege and the role that race plays in school culture and in the curriculum. The training engaged attendees in critical self-reflection about race and its impact on how teachers educate students in the classroom. My interest in equity issues and my work as an educator instructing students of multiple cultural backgrounds learning English, led me to volunteer to participate on the district team attending the CREATE program.

Over the next two years I attended CREATE training, which led me to reflect on issues of White privilege, White culture and the barriers they create for the learning of students of color and Black and Latino students in particular. The training also demonstrated how to create learning opportunities that utilize individualized or culturally based instruction to create greater student engagement in the classroom resulting in positive academic growth. In addition to trainings as a teacher, my studies within the doctoral coursework further emphasized that an educational approach that incorporates the culture of its students and recognizes the impact of White privilege on students of color has the potential to create a positive learning environment for students of color.

Based upon the doctoral course work in urban education and work as an educator around critical reflection about race and culturally responsive pedagogy, I began to wonder how school districts might implement these practices in a systematic way to close the achievement gap observed in standardized assessment data between White and Black students. Many educators in

the system have exposure to the term “achievement gap,” have used the term, or have attempted to implement strategies to close it. When I first decided to enter a doctoral program, I viewed “closing the gap” for Black students as a high area of need in urban education research. I considered examining schools implementing learning strategies aimed at raising achievement for Black students and measuring the impact of those strategies using widely available standardized assessments like the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) or Midwestern Knowledge and Concepts Examination (MKCE). However after months pouring over literature around Black student achievement, how students learn and achievement testing, I realized that focusing on fixing the achievement gap did not do enough to address the educational needs of Black students.

### **Background of the Study in Relation to Issues of the Achievement Gap**

Several researchers within education have noted the detrimental effects of the overuse of the term “achievement gap” as it relates to Black students (Carey, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010; English, 2002; Howard, 2010; Milner, 2013). In the article *Rethinking Achievement Gap Talk in Urban Education*, Milner (2013) describes how the overuse of the term “achievement gap” has led schools to focus on the wrong issues when determining how to meet the needs of students. He asserts that the term has led to both studies and practices that paint Black students in a deficit light because of the frequent comparison made between White and Black student achievement that places White students as the norm to which all others should aspire. The term begins to function as a reminder to Black students that they “achieve” at lower levels and its overuse becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for these students. The continued practice and increase in the use of standardized assessments that perpetuate these achievement comparisons make it more challenging to confront the use and focus on the term in schools (McMahon, 2011; Milner IV, 2013).



The term “achievement gap” arose amidst the Progressive Era in which the United States, according to researcher Paul Davis Chapman (1981), held a strong philosophical belief in “efficiency, science, and nativism” (p. 714). Americans sought more streamlined means of the production of goods and services and used science and technology as a way to accomplish those means. At the same time, Americans born here or whose families had immigrated long before, sought to limit immigration and to preserve the current American population based upon the view that the newer waves of immigrants arriving from countries like Ireland, Italy and locations in Eastern Europe were somehow of a lower class or gene pool (Selden, 1999). Intelligence testing gained popularity in the United States at the same time as the new wave of immigrants during the early 1900s. One of the first recognized assessments was the French developed Simon-Binet test translated to English and administered to school children by Dr. Henry Goddard (Franklin, 2007). Based on the results of this testing Goddard (1910) declared “a child cannot learn the things that are beyond his grade of intelligence. He may be drilled upon them but can only give rote work and will fall down upon them when carefully questioned” (Goddard, 1910 p.396 as cited in Franklin, 2007, p. 217). This research served to foster the belief of this era of innate intelligence (Selden, 1999). In 1916 Stanford University researcher Lewis Terman standardized the Binet test using American participants creating the Stanford-Binet test which the US military adopted as a tool for army recruiting during WWI (Franklin, 2007; Jensen, 1969). The success of the test with the military led to its growing adoption among public school institutions to sort students into ability groups as means to accommodate growing populations of students and to increase efficiency in education (Chapman, 1981). intelligence testing soon found its way into the public education system.

During the year of 1896 the Supreme Court ruled on *Plessy v. Ferguson* allowing states to set laws permitting Black and White segregation in public spaces as long as they were equal. This ruling combined with the introduction of intelligence testing served to build a case for separating Black students from White students in school and contributed to the origins of the terms “achievement gap” (Henry, 1998). Schools could use intelligence tests as a means to segregate students by race by citing gaps in ability. Around 1913 sociologist Howard Odum administered the Binet-Simon assessment to Black students in Philadelphia schools and determined that these students demonstrated significantly different ability levels compared to White peers. Odum went on to propose a separate curriculum focused around industrialization for all Black students within the Philadelphia school system (Franklin, 2007). The practice of segregating Black and White students continued into the middle of the twentieth century until the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in *Brown v. Board of Education* that separating educational facilities for Black and White students led to inequality in educational practices and could no longer occur in practice (Franklin, 2007). While the court ruling in 1954 blocked the legal practice of segregating students by race, it did not end the discussions or beliefs that Black students possessed innately lower levels of intelligence than their White peers (Jensen, 1969; Schockley, 1972). Over the last 60 years since *Brown v. Board of Education* the field of education has continued the practice of using intelligence testing to sort students, develop curriculum and inform educational practices.

Standardized testing similar to the Stanford-Binet IQ test remains a staple of the public educational system. Over the last century schools have used them to determine if a student moves onto the next grade level and, in some settings, if a student graduates (Linn, 2001). School aptitude tests may also determine a students’ level of learning path or track in school

ranging from a remedial level to an advanced level. Today schools may use tests like the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) to determine placement into honors or advanced courses or placement into a tiered support system. Additionally many students will take the SAT or ACT to determine their college track. Student assessments not only determine a student's educational pathway, but also may determine the success outcomes of a school or district.

### **Holding schools accountable to close the achievement gap.**

Based upon findings from the 2012 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report, researchers in the field of education could assert that the increase in accountability measures for schools over the last decade led to an increase in achievement for students of color, Black and Latino students in particular, who have traditionally performed at a lower rate than White students. From 1999 to 2004, assessment scores rose from 186 to 200 for Black students and 193 to 205 for Latino students. Scores also jumped for White students in the same time frame from 221 to 226. The celebration is short lived, however, when one reviews the long term disparities in scores between White and Black students as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) since 1975. Prior to NCLB Black students on average scored 33 points lower than White students. Since NCLB that number has dropped to 25 points lower on average, but in over forty years the US education system has only made minimum gains in its effort to address educational disparities for Black students.

Not only have gains in assessment scores by Black students been minimal, but also the increase in accountability measures has yielded unintended consequences. Many of the standardized assessments used in schools have converted into high-stakes assessments in which not passing such assessments result in consequences for students like not graduating as well as consequences for schools in the form of reduced funding or closure (Hursh, 2013). Under No

Child Left Behind, governments cut funding for schools, and districts were forced to close schools that unperformed from year to year. In one Midwestern state, for example, schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress based on the Midwestern Knowledge and Concepts Examination were placed on plans of improvement and faced federal sanctions in funding (Adequate Yearly Progress).

### **Achievement gap versus opportunity gap.**

The slow pace of educational gains for students of color has led some researchers to call into question the use of increased accountability measures like standardized assessments as a means to close gaps in student learning (Carey, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010; English, 2002; Hall Mark, 2013; Milner, 2013). English (2002) in his article *On the Intractability of the Achievement Gap in Urban Schools and the Discursive Practice of Continuing Racial Discrimination* speaks of the disparity in schools saying, “Educators mistake the lack of one kind of cultural capital as a lack of ability” (p.305). Standardized assessments only measure the cultural capital of the dominant culture (white, middle class), effectively penalizing cultures that have not adopted these norms.

Howard (2010) echoes the same sentiment expressed by English (2002) in his work *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools*. Howard (2010) asserts that until the education system begins to address equity in schools relative to issues of race and culture, the gap in learning for students of color will persist. These equity issues, not measured by any standardized assessment, result from gaps in opportunity for students of color like Latino or Black students and have existed long before the institution of public education. Howard (2010) states, “What is imperative about the groups who have been excluded from educational opportunities over the past several centuries is that by and large they are the very groups who continue to be at or near

the bottom of the achievement hierarchy today” (p.11). Several researchers in the field suggest that the ability to address a lack of educational opportunities for these populations requires schools to focus on underlying systemic problems of sexism, racism and inequitable policies and practices. They also stress that schools cannot effectively utilize standardized assessments to measure achievement of students until all students receive the same standard of education, standard of living, and standard of life experiences (Carey, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010; English, 2002; Hall Mark, 2013; Milner, 2013). In other words, the ability to address achievement and learning gaps requires the closing of several other gaps prevalent in society and will not be resolved through the implementation of a battery of standardized tests and school accountability measures.

As a counter-argument to the achievement gap, researchers within the last decade have begun to suggest that the way to create equitable education and increase student learning is by addressing the existing opportunity gaps. Irvine (2010) calls for a focus on closing other gaps that exist in education that have fed into the belief of an existing achievement gap including: “the teacher quality gap; the teacher training gap; the challenging curriculum gap; the school funding gap; the digital divide gap; the wealth and income gap; the employment opportunity gap; the affordable housing gap; the health care gap; the nutrition gap; the school integration gap; and the quality childcare gap” ( Irvine, 2010, p. xii as cited in Milner, 2013, p.4). Darling-Hammond (2010) similarly refers to these gaps as the “opportunity gap” and Ladson-Billings (2006) has termed it the “educational debt” that must be paid back into order to provide equity in learning for students of color. The advent of additional achievement testing, however, has made the repayment of the educational debt all the more challenging for schools.

In order to continue to close the “achievement gap” between Black and White students, schools have increased classroom time devoted to literacy and numeracy instruction at the expense of fine arts, technical, and physical education. Under pressure to raise achievement scores in a short span of time many low performing districts adopted canned, drill instruction curriculum and many teachers relied on teaching to the test rather than teaching the established curriculum (Jennings & Rentner, 2006; Harrison-Jones, 2007; Helig, Cole & Aguilar, 2010). Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that low income students of color “have been the primary victims of high stakes testing policies that determine promotion, placements, and graduation, and base school rankings and sanctions on test scores” (p. 74). Her research found that the emphasis in schools on high-stakes testing frequently led to teachers preparing students using worksheets and drill and recitation exercise as well as a de-emphasis on extended writing, investigations, and research papers. The high stakes tests have the effect of reducing the amount of higher order thinking that occurs in the classroom. She also noted that an increase in the use of these normed assessments leads to neglect of untested subjects like the fine arts. This increases the educational debt by creating barriers in the ability of students to think critically and analyze the world around them as well as demonstrate intelligence in subject areas not measured by normed assessments effectively devalues these areas of intelligence.

Not only do students in schools with low assessment results suffer from a loss of curricular rigor and opportunity, but they also suffer from a loss in educational resources as a consequence of high-stakes assessment. Darling-Hammond (2010) cites a study from the 1990s determining that “the highest achieving states—controlling for student poverty, language background, and race/ethnicity---were those with the best qualified teachers and with assessment systems used primarily to inform teaching and curriculum reform rather than allocate rewards

and sanctions to students and schools” (p.69). A high quality teacher has the greatest positive impact on student learning within the school setting (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Researchers examining education for Black students argue that the problem that Black students face lies not in their ability to learn or how much time they spend in one subject area, but rather in their access to high quality instruction, quality school environments, early education and teachers who understand their learning needs (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Theoharis, 2009). Beginning with the *No Child Left Behind Act* under the Bush administration and continuing with *Race to the Top* under the Obama administration, the federal government and the states continue to use assessment as a means to punish low performing schools. Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that when these schools lose funding, they also lose resources and fewer high quality teachers want to work there. This again contributes to the educational debt and widens the opportunity gap for students of color.

### **Problem Statement**

Standardized assessment of students as a measure of school and district accountability continues to dominate the educational landscape and perpetuate discussions and focus on the achievement gap by educational leaders. The overuse of the term “achievement gap” paints a deficit view of Black student learning and detracts from focus on addressing existing inequities in the school system that result in lowered success outcomes for Black students. The problem is that until school leaders redirect their focus away from standardized assessment and achievement gaps for Black students to address ways to close opportunity gaps for Black students they will continue to see minimum student engagement, high drop-out rates, and low academic growth for this population. This issue leads to the question of what are the conditions that allow for district leaders to build more equitable educational environments for Black

students that will promote the closure of opportunity gaps and result in higher success rates in learning? In order to examine this question I will draw on Culturally Relevant and Responsive Theory informed by Critical Race Theory and Social Constructivism.

## **Theoretical Framework**

I chose to focus on Culturally Relevant Theory supported by Critical Race Theory as the lens through which I will examine the conditions that allow superintendents to build equitable learning environments for Black students. Gloria-Ladson Billings (1995b) introduced the concept of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and defines it as “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 469). Several studies have identified a connection between improved learning outcomes for Black students through the implementation of Culturally Relevant Practices at a classroom and school level (Houchen, 2013; Howard, 2001; Howard, 2010; Howard & Terry, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner, 2011; Ware, 2006; Wiggins, 2008). Through this study I sought to identify how CRP factored into the conditions needed for superintendents to develop equitable learning environments for Black students.

Milner (2008) describes Critical Race Theory as being “concerned with disrupting, exposing, challenging, and changing racist policies that work to subordinate and disenfranchise certain groups of people and that attempt to maintain the status quo” (p.333). Critical Race Theory connects to the study in that for superintendents to develop environments of equity for Black students, they need to identify policies and practice within their systems that create barriers to learning opportunities. Both Culturally Relevant Theory and Critical Race Theory focus on systemic change as a means to improve student learning rather than focusing on a



student's nature or how their nurturing may contribute to a gap in learning. School leaders can rarely control for the economic disparities or other environmental factors occurring beyond the school walls that impact students, but they can control positive change in learning for students by addressing systemic issues within the school that have traditionally created gaps in opportunities to learn. These theories guide and support the work that school leaders need to do in order to impact student learning in a positive manner.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the stories shared by superintendents in a Midwestern state about how they approached the work of developing more equitable learning environments for Black students. An examination of their stories provides insight into the dispositions, actions and district environments that support the closure of opportunity gaps and improve success outcomes for Black students.

### **Research Question**

This study examined the following question: What are the conditions needed for superintendents in majority White districts to create more equitable learning environments for Black students? In order to further pull apart the main question, the study asked the subsequent questions:

1. What is the disposition of the leader based upon his/her views of the opportunity gaps and their underlying causes?
2. What actions has the superintendent planned or taken to address opportunity gaps district wide?
3. How does the environment of the district shape the superintendent's actions?

## **Rationale and Significance**

There is a critical need in this Midwestern state to examine the development of equitable learning environments as a national report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014) ranked this state as the having the highest disparities in terms of education and economics between White and Black students. Black students living in this state have the least opportunity for success in the educational system and post-high school than in any other state in the country. Black students in the state face what Darling-Hammond (2010) describes as an opportunity gap and defines it as “the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources –expert teachers, personalized attention, high quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials and plentiful information resources- that support learning at home and at school” (p. 28). Her research and that of others argues that in order to have a positive impact on Black student learning, schools not only need to implement culturally relevant practices in the classroom, but also they need to close gaps in areas like access to rigorous curriculum, access to quality and experienced teachers, and access to 21<sup>st</sup> century technology (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner IV, 2013).

Through the examination of the conditions needed by superintendents in this Midwestern state to build equitable learning environments I sought to understand how districts could improve upon the work to address opportunity gaps for Black students. This study fills a gap in the literature on Culturally Responsive Leadership specific to district level leadership that includes the superintendent. The study also informs the professional development needed of current superintendents as well as training programs for future district leaders in order to support their ability to lead district wide-change towards building environments of equity.

## **Researcher Assumptions**

My work and training through the CREATE program for this Midwestern state along with attendance at Beyond Diversity workshops and my studies around urban education as a graduate student with UW-Milwaukee, create certain biases within my work as a researcher. I believe that Culturally Responsive Practices, when implemented effectively and as part of a school's culture, can support an increase in positive learning outcomes for Black students. I also assume districts and schools may not have prioritized implementation of these practices due to focus on standardized testing requirements and raising achievement scores using methods to teach to the test. Focus on adoption of the common core along with a new teacher evaluation system for the state have also taken priority in terms of professional learning for teachers, which may not afford the time required to implement CRP with fidelity.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is divided into five chapters including the introduction, literature review, methodology, study findings, and analysis. Chapter 2, the literature review, provides a description of theories from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to present day around the learning abilities of Black students. It reviews many of the deficit theories surrounding their learning based on biological, cultural, and social explanations. The review also examines at length the theory of Culturally Responsive and Relevant Practices on which the analysis of the study is based. Culturally Relevant Theory and Culturally Responsive Theory suggests that educational systems can improve learning outcomes for students of color through an adjustment of educational practices including critical self-reflection by staff, curriculum centered on the culture and backgrounds of the students, and instructional strategies that account for learning styles and reinforce high rigor and expectations (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Chapter 3 provides a description of the methodology used in the study. This chapter outlines how the theory of

Culturally Responsive Theory shaped the selection of tools and will serve to inform the analysis of the study. It describes the selection of participants and interview study as the methodological approach. Chapter 3 details how the study will approach the gathered data in terms of its use for description, analysis and interpretation. Chapter 4 focuses on the findings of the research, presenting the stories of each of the eight superintendents in this study. It details the school districts of each leader as well as their educational philosophy. The chapter also provides descriptions of each leaders' view on the types of gaps that exist in their districts, the underlying causes of those gaps, the actions each leader took to address gaps and the challenges they faced when implementing change to build environments of equity. Finally, chapter 5 provides an analysis of the findings through a comparison of the leaders' stories and their alignment with current research and theory. This chapter also addresses the three main questions posed in the study, describes the implications of the study for current and future superintendents and makes recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature of How Black Students Learn**

Almost two decades of data released from the Midwestern Knowledge and Concepts Examination given to students annually shows that the state continues to have a wide gap in learning outcomes between Black and White students. The most recent data released from the 2012 MKCE in reading shows a state average for Black students scoring advanced or proficient in reading at 13.4% and white students at 42.5% (Midwestern State Department of Public Instruction). Schools across the country show Black students overrepresented in low track and special education programs and underrepresented in upper track and gifted programs. Data from the U.S. Department of Education in 2006 demonstrates that although Black students make up only 14.91% of the school aged population respectively, they make up 20.52% of students deemed to have learning disabilities. According to data from the College Board's (2009) 6<sup>th</sup> *Annual AP Report to the Nation*, Black students make up 14.5% of the nation's student population, but only 8.2% of the advanced placement population compared to 59.6% of the 61.6% White population in AP courses.

A large disparity exists between the number of White students placed in gifted programs and the number of Black students in gifted programs. Author Donna Ford (2010), in the article *Underrepresentation of Culturally Different Students in Gifted Education*, wrote that Black students are underrepresented in gifted programs by 48%. In other words, at least half a million Black students do not have access to a curriculum that would most benefit them (p. 32). Ford points out the obvious issues of underrepresentation include several factors like a lack of teacher referrals, disparities in intelligence testing, outdated policies for student placement, and social-emotional concerns for students labeled "gifted" on the part of the guardians. But she concludes that the bigger issue of underrepresentation revolves around deficit thinking, colorblindness, and White privilege.

Researchers have examined the issue of the Black and White student differences since the advent of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence test in 1916 (Jensen, 1969). Beginning in the early twentieth century and up to the early nineties, the research to explain the gap has primarily focused on a deficit view of Black culture and its negative impact on students' ability to learn. These deficit-focused theories have done little to address the learning deficits seen in Black student achievement data and neither have they served to advance education for Black students. Modern day research promoting the integration of Black culture and identity into pedagogical practice through the use of Culturally Responsive pedagogy informed by Critical Race Theory and Social Constructivist Theory has emerged to challenge past theoretical approaches as well as the achievement issue itself.

Research in the last two decades argues that the issue facing Black students in education lies not in an inability to achieve at the same level as White peers, but rather in an ability to access the same quality of education as their White peers. Darling-Hammond (2010) calls this the opportunity gap and defines it as “the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources —expert teachers, personalized attention, high quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials and plentiful information resources- that support learning at home and at school” (p. 28). Ladson-Billings (2006) draws a similar conclusion in her presidential address at AERA describing the most serious issue facing Black students as “educational debt.” She describes this debt as historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral issues impacting Black society that have accumulated over more than a century. Issues like segregated schooling, curriculum that fails to incorporate Black culture, school funding disparities between Black and White neighborhoods and lack of political representation of the Black population all contribute to a debt that the U.S. must repay in order create positive learning outcomes for Black students.

The means to close the opportunity gap or education debt for Black students lie in the use of current theories and new research to inform our pedagogical practices in schools and how we train teachers and school leaders to support the learning of Black student populations.

This review of the literature examines four areas surrounding the research on Black student learning. The first part of the review examines the major theories on Black achievement beginning with deficit focused theories centered on biological and social-cultural explanations of achievement and moving onto theories centered on systemic issues of inequality related to race. The second through fourth parts of the review dissect Culturally Responsive and Relevant Theory as a means to reduce and eliminate learning inequalities for Black students looking at the characteristics and dispositions of teachers using CRP in the classroom, specific instructional strategies or intervention tools aligned to CRP, and the kinds of leadership and professional development needed to implement CRP.

### **Methodology of the Literature Review**

I used several methods to access literature around the theory of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Using the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee library database I entered in the search terms of “culturally responsive pedagogy” and “culturally relevant pedagogy.” I also combined these search terms with “African American students,” “Black students,” and “achievement,” “achievement gap,” “opportunity gap” and “engagement.” I entered these same search terms in Google Scholar to look for articles not accessible through the database. In addition to search terms around CRP, I also typed in known researchers of CRP like Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings to access their foundational work on the topic. Finally, after reading through several articles on CRP, I used their bibliographical references to explore other articles cited within the research. The findings of these searches resulted in articles that provide

information on the development of the theory of CRP, its central tenets, how educators have used it in practice, specific ways to prepare teachers for its use, and its impact on student learning.

### **Twentieth Century Deficit Theories on Black Student Learning**

Research on the varied learning outcomes between Black and White students goes back to the early 1900s. Between the 1960s and 1980s researchers worked to attribute these differences to biological factors in the Black population pointing to an African gene as contributing to lowered ability in Black students. During the late 1970s the argument shifted slightly toward pointing to deficiencies in Black culture for the lower achievement levels of Black students. Persisting into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some research still holds up Black culture and society as the underlying issue explaining educational differences between Black and White students. Many of the theories used to explain the differences in educational outcomes between White and Black students serves to paint an image of Black culture and heritage as deficient.

#### **Biological theories.**

Walking the research on the disparities in educational outcomes for Black students to the decade following school integration, researchers relied on a genetic explanation of Black student deficiency. Jensen (1969) argues that researchers have been unfair in accusing schools of providing inadequate levels of instruction for students and most students have demonstrated success under the American educational system. He instead suggests that Black students possess a genetically predisposition to perform at a lower level than white students based on IQ test data collected from the Stanford-Binet assessment demonstrating lower IQ scores. During the 1960s and 1970s researcher Jensen conducted studies to determine the effect of race on ability. His research revolved around a two level theory of mental abilities with level I measuring short term



memory skills and level II measuring problem solving and analytical abilities (Jensen, 1973). Through a battery of testing that included the Stanford Achievement Test and the Lorge-Thorndike Intelligence Test, and given to Black and White students in urban and rural environments, Jensen's results showed White students scoring significantly higher in fluid and crystallized levels of intelligence than their Black peers. Based upon these results he drew the conclusion that ability depended to a significant degree on one's race.

Other researchers of the time like William Shockley (1972) supported Jensen's (1973) research and called for more in-depth studies on the specific genes in Black Americans that led to their lowered IQ. He believed that a lower number of Caucasian genes in Black Americans led to a lower IQ. In his own research Shockley (1973) claims that each 1% of Caucasian ancestry present in Black Americans raises their IQ by 1%. Based on this claim he asserts that we need to prevent those Black Americans with low numbers of Caucasian genes from producing with one another in order prevent further lowering the IQ of Black Americans (Shockley, 1972). In the post-World War II era, this argument did not gain ground and studies soon arose to refute Jensen (1973) and Shockley's (1972) findings.

At the same time that Jensen (1973) and Shockley (1972) made arguments in favor of a correlation between IQ and race, researchers like Scarr and Weinberg (1976) sought to refute their findings by conducting an adoption study. They found that Black students of average IQ biological parents adopted by advantaged White families achieved above average IQ scores. This led them to conclude that environment plays a greater role in determining IQ than biological factors. The authors also note that the biological children of the adoptive parents had higher IQ scores than their adopted siblings leading them to speculate that the negative impact of racism or

IQ test bias may contribute to a lowered IQ score. Similar studies refuting a relationship between IQ and race and arguing for a relationship between IQ and the environment follow.

Author Richard E Nisbett (1998) conducted an in-depth review of studies looking to link IQ to race and genetics. In his review he looked at studies relating skin color and IQ, the preponderance of European blood types over African blood types and IQ, and the percentage of European genes to African genes and IQ. Neither of the studies demonstrated that students with more African or more European genes or a certain skin type had significant differences in their IQ as a result. A further study examined by Nisbett (1998) looked at students of mixed race born to Black mothers and White fathers and students born to White mothers and Black fathers. If IQ varied by race or genetics, the researcher should have seen similar IQs of students from both types of families, but instead the research found that students with White mothers and Black fathers had an average IQ nine points higher than those born to Black mothers. Nisbett (1998) asserts that this study demonstrates environmental factors as a more reliable explanation for differences in IQ over race or genetics. While the acceptance of the genetic deficiency explanation for Black student achievement has since declined in educational research, using a theory of deficiency as an explanation for low achievement of Black students persists.

### **Cultural explanations.**

A second theory focused on deficiencies within black culture is the cultural deprivation theory. Cultural deprivation theory suggests that poor parenting on the part of African American cultures lead to poor academic outcomes for Black students (Friedman, 1978). Parents have deprived their children of the vocabulary and experiences they need to be prepared to enter education and thus students begin their learning with a severe deficit. Taba (1964) states that because these students come from homes with “limited educational tradition” their lack of

familiarity with school expectations and lack of parental understanding as to how to support academic learning in the home results in lowered performance (p. 149). She goes on to assert that parents have low ambition for their children and future careers and for Black males in particular, the frequent absence of a father contributes to this low ambition (Taba, 1964). While the explanation of cultural deprivation as an explanation for gaps in Black student learning still exist in modern society, the theory itself has met with challenge.

There are several reasons to reject Cultural Deprivation Theory as a sufficient explanation for the lower achievement levels of Black students. Tulkin (1972) argues that the theory fails to address cultural relativism. In other words, because the theory compares minority cultures to dominant cultures, it unfairly determines that the minority culture is inferior and automatically results in inferior levels of achievement. Differences in cultural practices relative to raising children do not necessarily equate to wrong or bad. Relying on CDT as an explanation of a learning gap also fails to acknowledge the structures and systems in place that lead to poor conditions for some Black students like access to health care and affordable nutrition. Further, it takes the onus off of institutions like schools to evaluate the effectiveness of their own practices in terms of the education of Black students.

Despite advancement in the field of education, some recent theories around Black achievement continue to propagate a message of Black deficiency. Madyun (2011) uses Social Disorganization Theory to explain the achievement gap. Social Disorganization Theory states that “the number of single-parent households, mobility, diversity, and poverty undermine a community’s ability to socially control and pass on the norms, expectations, and values that lead to acceptable successful outcomes by diluting modes of socialization” (Madyun, 2011, p.24). The author suggests that a lack of adult supervision within the community due to single parent

households, combined with a lack of unity between school and community, unstable relationships, and high poverty leading to low motivation all contribute to Black students achieving at a lower rate compared to White students.

There exist a number of reasons to reject SDT as an explanation for the differences in learning outcomes. While some of these factors may contribute to low levels of learning for Black students, most of the community issues described by the social disorganization theory lie outside the control of schools and educators. Research to address Black student learning needs to focus on what is within the power of the educator and schools to best support growth. While school communities may have the power to provide for students' basic needs or support a community to job development, they cannot control familial relationships or structures. Additionally, like previous theories, SDT paints an image of deficiency around Black culture and community. In this case it makes the suggestion that Black communities are dysfunctional and places the blame on their shoulders. It fails to account for factors outside the control of Black culture and community like systemic racism and inequality.

### **Current Theories: Nurture over nature**

The early 1990s brought about new developments in the research around learning for Black students and while some of it borrows from past theories related to how Black parents raise their children, it does not paint the Black community in a deficient light. This research marks a shift in suggesting the existence of an achievement gap and begins to point out the factors creating an opportunity gap for Black students.

### **Oppositional theory and “acting white.”**

One of the first researchers to begin to remove the blame of low performance from the Black community and point at institutions, privilege of the dominant culture, and systemic racism is Ogbu (1990). Rather than pointing to deficiencies in socioeconomic status, socialization, or IQ, Ogbu (1990) asserts that the issues of low achievement of Black populations stems from the historical issues in how they arrived in the country. He refers to the Black population as involuntary minorities in that they arrived in the United States as a result of slavery. He states, “Involuntary minorities resent the loss of their former freedom, regard the past as their ‘golden age,’ and interpret the social, political, and economic barriers erected against them as undeserved oppression” (Ogbu, 1990, p.47). As a result of this resentment, they feel the need to fight against the dominant group and their institutions like the educational system.

Ogbu (1990) goes on to explain that the fight against the dominant culture results in the development of a new cultural frame of reference that is markedly different from the dominant culture. They assume this new cultural identity to distinguish themselves from the dominant or white culture. Further, a Black person assuming any of the characteristics or behaviors of White people is considered a betrayal of one’s culture leading to added social or psychological pressures (Ogbu, 1990). Contributing to these views is a history of discrimination by White culture for no perceived reason other than a phenotypical difference as well as deeply rooted distrust stemming from unequal access to education, public spaces, careers, and so on. Ogbu (1990) states that as a result of the above factors, Black students perceive their peers who do well in school and accept the learning offered by these institutions as “acting white” (p. 52). Thus, to combat the dominant culture, Black students choose to oppose or disengage from the learning taking place in the classroom resulting in low performance and the gap we continue to see.

While Ogbu's (1990) theory begins to address the systemic issues for Black students caused by a White dominant culture, he does not take his theory far enough. Suggesting that Black students make a choice to oppose learning resulting in their own failure again contributes to the formation of a negative stereotype of Black culture. Further, suggesting that lowered levels of achievement occur by choice and not due to the poor quality of instruction or school climate continues to shift the responsibility away from the schools. Theories that focus primarily on the systemic issues and promote the value of Black culture better serve the purpose of understanding lower levels of achievement in Black student populations.

### **Environment and issues of Eurocentric learning.**

Shortly after Ogbu (1990) introduced oppositional theory, came research that sought to challenge deficit theories of Black culture and focus in on issues of race, racism, environment, and educational opportunity as the sources of educational disparity between Black and White students. Wilson (1992) contributes to the argument that environment has the greatest impact on intelligence and ability for Black students. In his work *Awakening the Natural Genius of Black Children* he makes the statement based on extensive research on children raised in tribes in African that the intellectual ability of Black children raised under the right circumstances can equate to or exceed that of any other ethnic group. Wilson's (1992) work provides guidelines on how to maximize the development of the Black child within the first three years of life including intense mother child interactions using stimulating patterns, communication, and attention focusing activities. In terms of developing communication he recommends the use of simple verbal and non-verbal cues and reading to the child from early on. The work goes on to describe home environments and early education practices for increasing intellectual ability. Wilson's (1992) focus goes beyond how parents can stimulate higher levels of learning in their young

children and dives into why society has labeled Black children as underperforming compared to White peers.

In addition to the call to action for Black parents to provide a more stimulating and active environment for their children, Wilson (1992) points to the injustice in how society measures ability and intelligence. He remarks:

It is the use of Europeans as our standard of measure that has turned Black psychology into a psychology of Black deviancy, which makes us talk about our children in terms of deviancies, deficiencies, as slow learners, and in other kinds of negative ways. We are using the wrong standard of measurement. (p.14)

The system of education and the messages that students receive daily based on Eurocentric culture serve to alienate Black children and pose a threat to their intellectual development and esteem. In the home environment Wilson (1992) pushes for parents to surround their children with Afrocentric culture including pictures, posters, books, and toys to create a sense of pride in their race and culture. He calls for the development of a “wholistic self-concept in Afrikan children” that allows them to push back against negative stereotypes of the Black population and encourages intellectual pursuits (p.110). In order to accomplish this he calls on Black society to publically promote Black academic achievement, to increase communication of Black accomplishments and contributions to society, to push for an Afrocentric education for their children, and to set high expectations for their children. Wilson’s (1992) work feeds into the development of theories from the 1990s into today that focus on the role that race plays in the educational system and the impact it has on learning and development for Black students.

### **Stereotype threat.**

Current research continues to examine the impact of race on Black student learning with one of the more recent theories being stereotype threat. McGee and Martin (2011) define stereotype threat as:

A type of confirmation bias in which the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype suppresses academic performance among Black students at all academic levels. (p. 1348)

Carl E. James (2012) asserts that stereotype threat derives from the “The cultural context of schooling, with its Eurocentric curriculum, homogeneity in its approach to the teaching/learning process, and reliance on culturally inappropriate assessments” (p. 484). He details how the stereotypes of Black males in particular as immigrant, fatherless, troublemaker, athlete, and underachiever result in their marginalization and limits their educational outcomes and life opportunities. For example, the stereotype that most Black males are fatherless creates an assumption that they lack the social structure and discipline that they would otherwise possess if they grew up in a two parent home (James, 2012). This further leads to the assumption by educators that Black males engage in higher levels of delinquent behavior and are troublemakers in general. The stereotype threat of the Black male as fatherless and therefore delinquent reflects many of the ideas also described in social disorganization theory. James (2012) suggests that until educators understand how the hegemonic structures within the education system perpetuate stereotypes of Black males and until they work to challenge those structures, a gap in learning between Black and White students will continue to exist.

Steele and Aronson (1998) believe the stereotype threat has the ability to lower academic performance of Black students with the increased consciousness of negative stereotypes relative



to their intellectual abilities. In other words, when Black students repeatedly receive messages that they perform at a lower academic level compared to White peers, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The authors suggest that describing a school assessment as a measure of ability or asking students to identify their race on a test leads invokes racial stereotypes about academic performance and leads to self-doubt (Steele & Aronson, 1998). Thus they conclude that in terms of assessment of Black student performance, schools should consider eliminating racial identification requirements on standardized tests and minimizing factors that raise their consciousness of Black stereotypes.

Researchers McGee and Martin (2011) also take on the theory of stereotype threat in their work on Black students majoring in mathematics and engineering. They suggest that the ability to overcome stereotype threat lies within the student's ability to understand racism and their own cultural identity as Black. Students who develop a strong Black identity and who can separate stereotypes from reality learn to manage the threat and uses stereotypes as a motivation to prove them wrong demonstrating they are not delinquents or underachievers.

### **Critical Race Theory.**

Critical Race Theory critiques institutions like schools which have perpetuated stereotypes, racism, and White supremacy. It involves five central tenets: counter storytelling, permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and a critique of liberalism (Decuir & Dixon, 2004, Ladson-Billings, 1998). Counter storytelling involves challenging Black cultural myths perpetuated by White culture. The permanence of racism involves the acknowledgement of the role that racism has played in shaping society as well as how racist hierarchical structures are embed within all political, economic, and social domains. Whiteness as property involves an understanding of how being White yields greater access to success and

opportunity. Interest convergence requires an examination of civil rights gains and the costs to Black Culture like the loss of African American Teachers and curriculum. Finally, the critique of liberalism calls into question the promotion of colorblindness not as a method to promote equality, but as a means to ignore the existence of racism (Decuir & Dixon, 2004). The central tenets of CRT serve to explain some of the reasons behind a Black and White achievement gap.

Several researchers use Critical Race Theory to explain the academic gaps between Black and White students (Decuir & Dixon, 2004; Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Ladson-Billings (1998) describes how White culture embedded in the educational curriculum has led to the elimination of the Black historical perspective or disempowerment of Black leaders of social justice. She also describes the promotion of low rigor programming for Black students as evidenced by their low enrollment in gifted and talented programming and high enrollment in special education and remedial tracks. Gillborn (2005) echoes this idea describing the creation of advantaged tracks for White students and disadvantaged tracks for Black students. In order to begin to shift power and structures away from White culture and create educational equity, we need to examine educational theories that serve to empower students of color and challenge Whiteness as normal.

### **Culturally Relevant Theory.**

Many researchers in the field of education have argued that the real issue behind the learning differences between White students and Black students has its roots in a cultural disconnect between Black students, the schools they attend, and the instruction they receive (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Singleton and Linton, 2005). This theory of a disconnect between Black students and the education they receive in public schools makes sense given that the original American Public school system was developed decades before Black

students had a right to equal access to education or any public education. It was created to educate white, middle class Americans. Even with student populations becoming increasingly diverse, the curriculum, pedagogy, and organizational culture remain grounded in white and middle class culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Modern researchers cite the cultural disconnect between Black students and the way they are taught as a lead contributing factor resulting in the learning differences between Black and White students (Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley, Irvine, Nieto, Shofield & Steven, 2001; Carter, 2005; Taylor, 2010; White-Clark, 2005). In her study *Subtractive Schooling* Valenzuela (1999) states:

Schools are organized formally and informally in ways that fracture students' cultural and ethnic identities, creating social, linguistic, and cultural divisions among the students and between students and staff. (p.5).

The consequences of such practices often result in the low performance of students in terms of academic achievement. Carter (2005) echoes these findings describing how students who do not connect culturally with the school or staffs who she labels "non-compliant believers," tend to have low performance compared with peers who have found a way to connect with the school culture.

Culturally Relevant Theory recognizes that learning for many students of color is impeded by an educational system that reflects only the values of the White dominant culture. Ladson-Billings (1995b) initially defined culturally relevant pedagogy as "a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (p. 469). By placing value on the culture of Black students and using it as a source of learning, the CRP model moves away from the deficit construct that

dominated prior research and focused on a Black and White achievement and instead moves educational research towards addressing the opportunity gap stemming from cultural deprivation in the curriculum. Thus, the efforts to prepare teachers for working with Black students should derive from the theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy that places greater value on the culture of students and identifies system rather than human deficits as the issue in students' ability to learn.

### **Synthesis of the Literature on Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy**

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy has its roots in Vygotsky's (1980) theory of social constructivism. This theory holds that in order for effective learning to take place, it must occur in a context that is culturally appropriate or relevant to the child's life (Vygotsky, 1980). He also emphasizes the need for learning to be tied to something meaningful for the student and to be done in a natural manner. The framework presented by Vygotsky (1980) ties into more recent research surrounding the need for culturally responsive practices in schools and the promotion of social justice in education. These theories identify inequities in learning that result from a lack of recognition of how school systems operate out of a white culture perspective and how this impacts the different cultures, races, genders, and religions that operate within the school and the decisions made around them. In other words, many public schools do not provide effective learning for students of color because the curriculum does not provide relevancy to their lives, is not meaningful to them, or is not taught in a natural way.

#### **Dispositions of educators in alignment with CRP.**

The *Oxford Dictionary* (2015) defines the word disposition as "A person's inherent qualities of mind and character." Early research around Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and

Theory by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995b) began by examining the dispositions or characteristics of teachers with demonstrated success in working with students of color. She conducted a three year study of eight teachers who achieved success working with African American students. After working with the teachers she discovered common threads among their work. All teachers demonstrated a passion for teaching, had chosen to teach in low income areas with high populations of African American students, and all wanted to give back to the community. These teachers also believed that all of their students could be successful and that success came from the development of equitable relationships between the teacher and the students. Finally, rather than relying on textbooks for teaching, these instructors identified the state standards they needed to teach and adapted the lesson to meet the needs and include the interests of their students. Ladson-Billings (1995b) used these theories to derive what has come to be known as Culturally Relevant Theory and challenged future researchers to both reconsider our present notion of good teaching and replicate her study to further understand the characteristics that make a teacher successful in working with African American students.

Within the theory of Culturally Relevant Theory Ladson-Billings (1995a) identifies three central tenets:

1. Students must experience academic success
2. Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence
3. Students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (p.160)

These tenets led to the development of common dispositions that teachers needed to possess to engage in culturally relevant and responsive practices. (Bondy, Ross, Gallingsane & Hambacher, 2007; Gay, 2010; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Madhlangobe &

Gordon, 2012; Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Ware, 2006.)

Included in this descriptions of dispositions is that teachers must hold high expectations for all students. This action might include scaffolding and modeling lessons, creating nurturing environments, and taking personal responsibility for student's success. Secondly, teachers must value the use of students' culture as the context for learning. They must understand and use the culture -based learning styles of their student as well as acknowledge that behavior is also a cultural construct. Further, teachers need to understand how their own culture influences how and what they teach. Finally teachers must prioritize the development of students' skill in critiquing cultural norms. This could involve engaging students in social justice work and being explicit about the power dynamics of mainstream society (Morrison, et. al., 2008).

In the last decade or more since Ladson-Billing's (1995a) study, several researchers have attempted to replicate or expand on her study examining the teacher dispositions of those implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the classroom or as leaders. Bondy, Ross, Galligane and Hambacher (2007) examined CRP in the classroom of three female novice teachers in an urban setting with a predominantly African American population also receiving free or reduced lunch. Like the teachers in Ladson-Billing's (1995) study these teachers sought to build caring relationships with their students and took time to learn their interests. They also set high expectations for all students, sought student input to the development of classroom policies, and held students accountable to the learning and classroom expectations. Finally these teachers communicated to their students in ways that incorporated familiar terms and expressions from students' popular culture as well as used a call and response method of communication to which students were more accustomed. Over time, these similar characteristics have taken on other terms outside of CRP as well.

In one study from Ware (2006), the dispositions of CRP have also been referred to as the Warm Demander Pedagogy. WDP is most frequently used to describe African American teachers working with African American student populations. These teachers, like those in the studies of CRP, have demonstrated success in helping African American students to achieve. Understanding how they work with this population and what a warm demander looks like, can help us understanding how to work with pre-service teachers to prepare them to work with African American populations. Like the teachers in other CRP studies, the warm demander teachers set high classroom expectations for all students emphasizing the need for timeliness and work completion. They maintained a caring environment and created safe communities in the classroom. Learning was a focal point in the classroom and was presented through the culture of the students.

### **Dispositions of school leaders in alignment with CRP.**

Later research around CRP has expanded their examination of dispositions to educational leaders, specifically to principals and place greater emphasis around social justice leadership. Theoharis (2009) conducted a study of seven principals in elementary and secondary settings that he described as engaging in social justice leadership (S JL). He defines S JL as principals who “kept at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors in the United States” (p.11). Like the teachers in the studies by Ladson-Billings (1995b), these leaders demonstrated success in improving the learning environment for Black students and for students of all races by prioritizing equity and justice within their schools. Through his study Theoharis (2009) identified nine core traits which shaped the dispositions of these school leaders:

1. Possesses a bold vision

2. Believes that inclusive services and heterogeneous grouping benefit all students
3. Is committed to differentiation and teaming
4. Believes a sense of belonging and of classroom community are imperative for learning
5. Sees teachers as professionals
6. Is committed to own learning and learning of others
7. Understands and values diversity
8. Believes in holistic approach to working with students and families
9. Is committed to engaging with the community (p.142)

Several of these characteristics overlap with those found in the CRP studies of teachers. Both teachers and principals demonstrate a commitment to their own growth, they value diversity in the classroom and in the school, and they seek to create nurturing environments for learning (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane & Hambacher, 2007; Gay, 2010; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Theoharis, 2009; Ware, 2006).

Another study of principals having a positive impact on the learning outcomes for students of color conducted by Johnson (2007) demonstrates similar leadership characteristics as those identified by Theoharis (2009) and teacher characteristics identified by Ladson-Billings (1995b). In her reanalysis of data from three U.S. case study schools in the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) she found that the principals in the study maintained high expectations for all staff and students and promoted a student centered learning environment and child centered discipline practices through professional development. The study, however, also found areas of dissimilarity between previous findings of Ladson-Billing (1995b) and Theoharis (2009). The principals in her study did not appear to emphasize



incorporating the home culture or community into the curriculum nor did they emphasize inclusive instructional practices. This goes against the majority of the research surrounding culturally responsive practices in the classroom and the limited research on leadership (Bondy, Ross, Gallingsane & Hambacher, 2007; Gay, 2010; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Theoharis, 2009; Ware, 2006) and is one of the few studies examining culturally responsive leadership to reflect these outcomes.

### **Educator actions in alignment with CRP.**

Synthesis of the research around CRP during the latter half of the first decade of the millennium echoes the characteristics presented in the initial research that teachers successfully using CRP in the classroom demonstrate high expectations for all student and take personal responsibility for their learning. In addition to describing the characteristics of culturally responsive teachers, research moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century also describes instructional and curricular strategies demonstrating teacher cultural competence. Culturally competent teachers build upon the background knowledge of students when designing lessons. One strategy involves the development of a more prescribed curriculum to match the content through which a teacher develops skills to the culture of their students (Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008). Teachers should consider their choice of texts relative to their students and whether the protagonists, the images, or the historical information matches the population of their classroom (Rychly and Graves 2012). Gay (2002) refers to the above practices as “designing culturally relevant curricula” in her article *Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching*. She suggests that teachers need to adapt 3 types of curricula, “formal,” “symbolic,” and “societal,” for the cultures of students they teach (pp.108-109). The “formal” curriculum involves how teachers

use curricular resources like textbooks and standards. Gay (2002) suggests that teachers do a cultural analysis of these resources to determine how the texts approach diversity and controversial issues around areas like race, gender, and ethnicity and if the texts provide equity in addressing a variety of cultural groups. Teachers should revise these texts and resources as needed to assure they directly address difficult issues and align to the cultures present in the classroom.

The second type of curricula involves symbolic curricula described by Gay (2002) as the decorations displayed within the room and how the teacher manages procedures and establishes classroom expectations. Teachers must develop an awareness that the types of signs, posters around the classroom along with how they address students have the power to communicate how a student and his or her culture are valued or devalued. Teachers should attempt to convey a sense of equity in how different cultural groups are represented throughout the classroom as well as in how rules and procedures apply (Gay 2002).

The third type of curricula involves societal curricula, described by Gay (2002) as how the mass media portrays different cultural groups in mediums like television, movies, and the news. In the last decade social media outlets like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and other internet sites also convey images of various cultural groups. In this case, Gay (2002) asserts that a teacher engaged in culturally relevant practices will incorporate ways to combat stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals of these groups in the media through lessons in the classroom as part of the curricula. Not only is what instructors teach important to establishing a culturally responsive classroom, but so are the means through which an instructor conveys the curricula to students and how they respond.

Researchers in the field of CRP stress the need for teachers to understand the communication styles of various cultural groups as an instructional strategy (Gay, 2002; Howard, 2010; Rychly and Graves, 2012). Gay (2002) describes how traditional schools have encouraged the use of a “passive-receptive style” in which the learner quietly receives information from the teacher (p. 111). On the other, many other cultures, specifically among students of color like Latino and Black students, engage in an “active-participatory” styles in which the conversation flows freely between the speaker and listener, even overlapping at times. Teachers or observers not engaged in CRP might view this as the students acting rude or disrespectful, but for many of these students a passive-receptive style contradicts how they learned to communicate in the home and outside of school. Teachers practicing CRP can look for ways to incorporate multiple communication styles into the classroom as well as instruct students on how to code-switch to use different types of communication styles based on the nature of the lesson activity (Gay, 2002; Howard, 2010). In addition to teaching students different ways of communicating within the classroom as well as adapting to various styles from students, teachers need to instruct students on the skills of critical analysis.

Ladson-Billings (1995a) stated as a tenet that teachers must help students learn to critique cultural norms. This tenet has since evolved into the development of critical consciousness in students. Critical consciousness consists of developing critical literacy, engagement in social justice work, being explicit about the power dynamics of mainstream society, and sharing power in the classroom (Morrison et. al., 2008). Examples of critical literacy in the classroom may involve providing students with critical thinking questions prior to reading a text or allowing students to debate a controversial topic. Teachers might explicitly instruct students on how to identify the hidden or racially biased curriculum within a body of work (Morrison et. al., 2008).

In order to promote engagement in social justice work a teacher might present a math problem in a context related to economic inequality within the community. Other social justice work might involve the students directly providing a service to the local community like a neighborhood beautification program. The teacher could engage students in a project involving problem solving a specific issues or issues in the community. Morrison et. al. (2008) uses an examples of students troubleshooting the issue of excess liquor stores near schools in their community.

In terms of addressing power dynamics in society and in the classroom Morrison et. al. noted that teachers should openly discuss the power systems that exist and work to validate the cultures of the students in the classroom. They may do this by teaching students how and when to code switch between Standard American English and their vernacular based upon specific situations and settings. To balance power in the classroom teachers would allow students to be part of the decision making process in developing rules and procedures. Students might assist with developing criteria for assessments or for a class syllabus. Providing students with greater choice in terms of their learning also supports a balance in power (Morrison et.al.) In addition to identifying and expanding on the central tenets of CRP in terms of instructional strategies, researchers have begun to make suggestions for the kind of professional learning that teachers need to develop these characteristics.

Researchers in the field of CRP have identified barriers for pre-service teachers using this pedagogy in their classroom. As described earlier, nearly 80% of instructors in k-12 education are white and operate from a White or Eurocentric perspective. Research around pre-service teachers suggests that many have negative attitudes, low expectations, and minimal experience working with students outside of their cultural group, which can inhibit the academic

performance of students of color in their classrooms (Barnes, 2006; Gay, 1978; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Morrison et. al., 2008). In order for teachers to become competent in the use of CRP and work with students of color, effective professional learning is needed. A key component to learning repeated throughout the literature involves the use of teacher reflection on how their own culture influences their actions, lesson plans, and communications in the classroom (Barnes, 2006; Howard, 2003). Barnes (2006) states that “understanding the factors that contribute to certain behaviors is the first step in the change process” (p.92). Howard (2003) identifies specific questions to be used for engaging teachers in a critical reflection process:

1. How frequently and what types of interactions did I have with individuals from racial backgrounds different from my own growing up?
2. Who were the primary persons that helped to shape my perspectives of individuals from different racial groups? How were their opinions formed?
3. Have I ever harbored prejudiced thoughts towards people from different racial backgrounds?
4. If I do harbor prejudiced thoughts, what effects do such thoughts have on students who come from those backgrounds?
5. Do I create negative profiles of individuals who come from different racial backgrounds? (p.198)

Taking teachers through this reflection process allow them to explore their own racial and cultural identity as well as the role that racism plays in educational policy and classroom instruction. After providing teachers with the time and space for critical reflection around their own identities and its impact on others, the next step becomes working with teachers to use critical reflection as they examine classroom data. Teachers need to question and reflect on the

racial breakdown of students in accelerated and decelerated educational tracks, how they differentiate for and address cultural differences, and how they evaluate students or allow for multiple measures of evaluation (Gay, 1978; Howard, 2003). An examination of these factors and a shift in classroom practices towards recognizing and valuing the culture of all students has been shown to increase the performance of students of color.

### **Principal actions in alignment with CRP.**

Research in the last decade has begun to examine leadership actions toward implementing CRP as a school-wide initiative under principal leadership. Johnson (2006) walks the research on culturally responsive principal leadership back 50 to 60 years examining a female school principal working in Harlem in the 1940s, Gertrude Ayer. Under her direction, African American students attending her school made positive gains in achievement. Johnson asserts that culturally responsive leaders will take action to serve as public intellectuals. In her role Principal Ayer wrote journal articles, reports, and held community forums around the art and science of instruction. Johnson (2006) also refers to leaders as curriculum innovators. Principal Ayer worked to develop African American students as global citizens through the teaching of history and culture and the development of a socio-political consciousness. She placed emphasis on the development of classroom learning that mimicked real life. Ayer also worked to reach out to the community by opening her school up to offer services like health and educational workshops. She invited community members into the classroom to share their knowledge with students. Finally Johnson (2006) sees culturally responsive leaders as social activists. Ayer engaged in a number of activist activities taking on labor issues affecting African American girls and women. She promoted intercultural education programs and worked to develop positive race

relations in Harlem. During her lifetime Ayer pioneered the practice of culturally responsive leadership.

Similar culturally responsive actions taken by principals within the last decade have also been identified. Normore and Gaetane (2007) conducted a study of four female secondary principals, two African American and two White, whose work in their buildings aligned to social justice leadership practices. All four leaders targeted learning for marginalized populations of students and prioritized their needs in terms of policy and reform. Over the course of the school year these leaders promoted ongoing discussion around issues of social justice. For example, they modeled culturally responsive teaching techniques for staff and engaged staff in study groups focused on Black achievement and diversity. One leader required her teaching staff at the onset of each year to engage students in conversations about race initiating conversation through the question, “Have you ever been looked upon unfavorably because of your ethnicity?” (Normore & Gaetane, 2007, p.193). In addition to staff specific professional development, leaders also developed relationships and supports with students. One of the leaders supported the creation of ethnic specific student clubs in order to promote students discussion around issues of equity and provide for student support.

How leaders hired and worked with teaching staff played a key role in their culturally responsive leadership. They sought out teachers who demonstrated cultural sensitivity and who expressed a desire to work with marginalized populations. They also held high expectations for their teaching staff, engaged in collaboration around decision-making processes, and practiced distributed leadership.

### **Positive learning outcomes aligned to CRP.**

Studies of Culturally Responsive Practices that include the teacher characteristics, instructional strategies, and professional development as described in the previous sections have identified links between its use in the classroom and higher achievement of Black students (Houchen & Houchen, 2013; Howard, 2001; Howard & Terry, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner, 2011; Ware, 2006; Wiggins, 2008). In 2001 Howard interviewed a sample of elementary level Black students in an urban setting where teachers had been identified as culturally responsive. The students identified characteristics of their optimal learning environment, which aligned to the identified practices of CRP. Students stated that they learned best when teachers “made school seem like home” (Howard, 2001, p.145). They also described how the teacher put emphasis on academic growth and created an environment that felt caring, created a sense of community, and engaged them in learning. The findings of the Howard (2001) study have also been replicated within higher education.

Wiggin (2008) specifically studied a cohort of academically successful Black students attending a University to determine what qualities they viewed in teachers that supported their high achievement. The students in the study cited caring teachers who built relationships with students as well as provided support in and out of the classroom as one of the key components of their success. They also described teachers who promoted critical thinking and taught outside of the Eurocentric curriculum or taught a culturally relevant curriculum as other important qualities that supported their learning. The characteristics described by these high achieving Black students aligns to the findings of what effective instructors of CRP do in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000). Other studies aligning CRP to achievement have examined schools and classrooms that implemented CRP. While the study by Wiggin (2008) and Howard (2001) focus on high achieving Black students’ views of what they identify as quality teachers, others



studies have attempted to demonstrate how low performing Black students have been able to grow and achieve with the infusion of CRP in the classroom.

Howard and Terry (2011) identified a link between the infusion of CRP through a school program raised achievement for Black students in a California high school. The students in their study participated in a school program partnering with UCLA called GEAR UP or Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. The program itself provided students tutoring in class and after school, development of study skills, and test preparation. In addition to the GEAR UP program, there was a school-wide effort to recruit and train teachers and tutors to use culturally responsive practices, maintaining an environment that promoted caring, rigor, and high expectations and accountability for all students. The professional development for staff focused on the social and emotional aspects of human development, cognitively guided instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and literacy, learning, and culture. After following the students through the program, they found a significant increase in enrollment of Black students in AP classes, and increased pass rate of Black students taking the California High School Exit Exam, and twice as many Black students being accepted into a four-year college. Others have attempted to replicate this work in other classrooms.

Houchen (2013), a researcher practitioner at the time, conducted a study of 24 students enrolled in an intensive writing course who are also primarily African American in Florida. These students were enrolled in the course due to a failing score on the Florida Comprehension Assessment Test (FCAT). The classroom teacher used CRP to establish the classroom culture. She worked with high school level students to develop student generated rules, understand student cultural perspectives and learning styles, establish a culture of caring, and include African American figures into the curriculum with regularity. Houchen (2013) found that 84% of

students taking the FCAT retake exam who had been exposed to CRP passed the during the 2009 to 2010 school year compared to the state average of 29%. Other studies in the field of CRP while not directly linking it to student achievement have linked it to increased engagement and self-esteem.

Researchers have found that Culturally Relevant Pedagogy can raise the confidence and level of engagement with learning in Black students (Bondy et. al., 2007; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011; Schellenberg & Grothaus, 2009). The Schellenberg and Grothaus (2009) study examined the effects on third grade Black male students' self-esteem of combining culturally sensitive school counseling interventions with core academic standards. The school aimed to break down the negative image of Black males created by stereotypes that led both Black male students and teachers to believe they would perform poorly. They found that the program increased student attainment of academic goals and increased reported levels of self-esteem by 72 percent. The studies conducted by Schellenberg and Grothaus (2009), Houchen (2013), and Howard and Terry (2011) around the implementation of CRP within a school system all demonstrate the link between CRP and positive learning outcomes for Black students. In order to make this work part of a system like those studied above, educators must also understand how to initiate and lead the work.

### **Challenges to Culturally Relevant Theory**

Culturally Relevant Theory like other theories related to the learning of Black students, is not without its challenges and critics. Schmeichel (2012) makes that argument that like prior theories describing barriers to Black achievement in education, CRT contributes to the promotion of a cultural deficit. By placing emphasis on addressing cultural differences in the classroom in instruction we categorize and create more stereotypes of Black students. She also

contends that CRT assumes that all Black students learn via one prescribed method. Reviewing the definition and foundations of CRT, however, suggests that these critiques are based more upon poor implementation than upon the theory itself. CRT states that educators develop a deeper understanding of the students in their classroom to develop lessons differentiated to their cultural needs (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2005). This does not suggest that educators find a one size fits all pedagogy for one particular race as Schmeichel (2012) would suggest. Thus, one of the main issues with using CRT involves teachers not having the proper training on the theory to implement it without making assumptions that race implies a certain culture.

Researchers have suggested that the improper implementation of CRP, like most educational reforms, leads to poor academic results or no positive change (Hyland, 2009; Sleeter, 2011). Sleeter (2011) argues that researchers have marginalized and weakened the use of Culturally Relevant Theory through the persistence of simplistic conceptions of the theory, a lack of research linking it directly to achievement, and through fear of the loss of hegemony on the part of the White elite. She further discusses four simplistic conceptions of the theory that include CRT as a cultural celebration, trivializing the need to build student and teacher relationships, fixed, homogenous conceptions of cultures, and assuming that working through culture without addressing racism will create equity. These conceptions named by Sleeter (2011) relate back to and explain Schmeichel's critique of CRT. Strong implementation of culturally responsive practices has the potential to correct or avoid these simplistic conceptions, but it needs to begin with the education of teachers.

The other challenge to implementing culturally responsive practices involves the training of teachers to implement CRP effectively and avoid reducing it to the celebration of cultural holidays. In Hyland's (2009) case study of a White teacher's journey to become culturally

responsive she describes the difficulty the teacher had in understanding the political struggles and differences in worldviews between herself and the Black community where she taught.

While the teacher possessed the belief that all children could attain academic excellence and took responsibility for the outcomes of her students, she needed more intense training to gain ability to build relationships with the surrounding community. Hyland (2009) argues that teachers need experiences that help them develop the “pedagogical and relational skills and dispositions necessary for teaching historically marginalized students” (p.110). Thus, within the research on culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy, there exists a need to take a closer look at how to prepare teachers for this work.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Schools cannot rely on the one or more teachers in a school using culturally responsive practices to close the opportunity gap and increase learning for Black students. This work must occur school-wide and district-wide to begin to pay back the educational debt that has accumulated in the U.S (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This requires the dedication of school leaders to guide staff in the use of CRP and in their growth toward cultural competence. The literature on culturally responsive practices describes the potential and actual cases where the implementation of culturally responsive practices by teachers and principals has a positive effect on learning outcomes for Black students. The literature on Culturally Relevant Theory details the dispositions and action steps including instructional and curricular strategies, and the professional development needed by teachers and principals to implement this work to fidelity.

The Midwestern state in this study has been identified as having the lowest success outcomes for Black students and some of the highest gaps in learning between Black and White students in the nation (Annie E Casey, 2014). Based upon the current research, the adoption and

implementation of culturally responsive practices as district-wide system, could serve to narrow the gaps in learning for Black students and increase opportunities for success (Houchen & Houchen, 2013; Howard, 2001; Howard & Terry, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner, 2011; Ware, 2006; Wiggins, 2008). However, the existing literature around culturally rerelevant practices is limited in its examination of district-wide implementation as well as in studies of superintendents who have led this work. The majority of the literature around CRP has primarily focused on the dispositions and actions of teachers and principals rather than on district level leadership (Bondy, Ross, Gallinggane & Hambacher, 2007; Gay, 2010; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Johnson, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Theoharis, 2009; Ware, 2006)

Based upon the limited studies around culturally relevant leaders it becomes difficult to identify the dispositions that culturally responsive superintendents might possess and what actions they must take as a district to effectively implement the work needed to close learning gaps for Black students. While the dispositions of these leaders may align to the qualities of culturally responsive teachers and principals, additional research in this area is needed to guide the work of CRP at a district-wide level.

The implementation of culturally relevant practices in every classroom and every school requires leadership. While teachers may do this work individually in the classroom, it does not create a guarantee that every Black child will have access to these teachers and methods of learning. Hall and Hord (2011) in their work on implementing system change state that “administrator leadership is essential to long-term change success” (p.13). They describe how those at the bottom of an organization like teaching staff may succeed in implementing changes to a system, but assert that without leaders to provide ongoing support, the change often fades

away. I propose that in order to successfully close learning gaps for Black students educators must have a sense of understanding of how CRP looks at every level of a school system from the district level of the organization to the classroom level. To do this, research is needed to fill gaps in understanding the dispositions and actions of culturally responsive district level leaders.

## **Conclusion**

When addressing the opportunity gap between Black and White students, the literature supports the need to exercise caution not to rely on deficit models that create stereotypes and negative perceptions about the ability or desire of Black students to learn. Culturally Responsive or Relevant Practice as a theory of student learning can help educators and leaders to better understand how teacher expectations, relationships with students, and individual culture influence the learning of the students within the classroom and school. The theory emphasizes the need for all teachers to expect academic success of all students, to help students develop cultural competence, and to engage students in critiquing cultural norms and the status quo (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). To do this, teachers must develop caring relationships with their students and engage in reflection relative to the influence of their own cultural beliefs and its impact on lesson development and learning and leaders must guide teachers on how to do this work. While there exists a basis of understanding of the theory's central tenets and the potential it has to increase student achievement and self-esteem, additional research is needed to identify how the dispositions and actions of district level leaders like superintendents can impact teachers' and principals' ability to embrace the philosophy and implement culturally relevant practices with fidelity. Knowledge of current practices around district leaders' approach to addressing the opportunity gap for Black students will serve to inform the action steps needed to move CRP forward as an embedded practice within school systems.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology to Examine the Conditions needed to Build Equitable Learning Environments**

This study used a multi-case study approach with a focus on interviews as the primary source of data collection. The use of a case study allowed me to explore each superintendent in the study in a more in depth manner to develop a sense of their dispositions and actions over time around creating conditions of equity (Creswell, (2007). Through this approach I was able to identify themes within and across cases relative to the types of opportunity gaps identified, the underlying causes of gaps, the actions to close gaps and the challenges faced when implementing equitable practices.

#### **Knowledge Claims and Epistemology**

My epistemological viewpoint played a central role in the development of my research and purpose. I view knowledge as gained and evolving based on the gathering of new information and interpretations from differing perspectives and through experiences over time. *I identify myself as a contextual knower in that I view issues from multiple perspectives and engage in the collection of multiple facts before drawing conclusions (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). My experiences had the greatest effect on how I know and evaluate what I know.* When we see how new information applies to us and can actively engage with it and make it real, we learn, and it becomes part of who we are.

*I also believe that what we know comes from what we experience, and how we understand an event at one period in our life may change at another time, in other words I agree that knowledge is constructed. I identify with the notion that we begin our lives believing that what we are told is the only truth that exists, but that as we grow, and if we are exposed to higher order thinking, we can begin to construct knowledge through independent thought and careful analysis of the information (Magolda1992 as cited in Hofer & Pintrich, 1997).*

*Additionally, knowledge that is relevant to our own personal experiences seems to be more memorable than knowledge that with which we cannot identify.*

*My belief that knowledge is constructed through experience has led me to support a teaching ideology that provides authentic, student-centered, and hands-on lessons. Lessons need to be presented to students in a manner through which they can relate. For example, in teaching a second language to students, I know that if I want to capture their attention when learning new vocabulary I can use visuals that reflect their popular culture. In this same manner, they are taking what is familiar to them, the pop culture reference, and constructing new terminology to represent it. The students build knowledge and stay engaged, because the material relates to their lives and is significant to them. Without the incorporation of real world situations and cultures, the lesson might feel like busy work that would likely be forgotten in a matter of days or weeks. Yet this is how so much of the educational system operates, via more of a “sit and get” approach rather than basing lessons on student culture, especially when it comes to mandated high stakes testing (Jennings & Rentner, 2006; Harrison-Jones, 2007; Helig, Cole & Aguilar, 2010). As a result of my epistemological beliefs as it relates to education, I focused my study around examining how district leaders can shape learning to reflect more a constructivist approach to learning taught through a culturally relevant lens.*

## **Research Paradigm**

The basis for this research relied heavily on culturally relevant theory and the teacher and school leader practices found within it. As such, the research paradigm most closely aligned to a post-positivist approach in that the study began with a theory and sought multiple perspectives around the issue for the basis of analysis (Creswell, 2007). A qualitative approach best



supported the examination of the conditions needed for superintendents to build equitable learning environments for Black students. Creswell (2007) defines qualitative research as research that:

Begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. (p.37)

Characteristics of the research involve collecting data in a natural setting and conducting analysis that identifies patterns or themes in the data (Creswell, 2007). I chose a qualitative approach because I wanted to collect descriptive data from superintendents working to address opportunity gaps for Black students in districts and to identify patterns in their responses that could lead educators to better understand how to increase equity in school systems. While a quantitative approach using a survey could yield information about what strategies and professional development the leaders used and implemented, it would not have yielded data on the dispositions of those involved. Understanding the frame from which leaders operated and their dispositions require the gathering of more complex details gained through a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007).

Addressing the research question of the conditions needed for superintendents to build equitable learning environments required detailed discourse with leaders from multiple districts to identify patterns and themes in the data. Thus, I used of a multi-case study as the methodological approach to address the question. Creswell (2007) suggests the use of a case study when the researcher has identified an issue and wishes to illustrate it through research. This study identified opportunity gaps in school systems as contributing to the inability of Black students to experience success in education as the issue and it sought to understand the ways in

which multiple district leaders addressed the issue. This case study relied heavily on data collected from interviews of the selected superintendents along with information collected on each district's strategic plan taken from their websites and district performance data made available to the public on MidwesternDash, the Midwestern State Department of Public Instruction's public portal for educational statistics.

### **Research Setting**

A key characteristic of qualitative research involves conducting the research within a natural setting or in the field where the participants encounter the research issue (Creswell, 2007). Each superintendent selected their preferred interview location, which for each case was their office in the district. I traveled to each location at a mutually agreed upon date and time to conduct one interview with each superintendent.

### **Research Sample and Data Sources**

I used of purposeful sampling to select participants for the interview study. Creswell (2007) defines this form of sampling as one in which "the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (p.125). In this case I sought out superintendents who could provide perspectives around their work to build equitable learning environments for Black students. I intended to use maximal variation sampling as the type of purposeful sampling. Maximal variation is defined as selecting cases that differ on a particular characteristic (Creswell, 2012). As this multi-case study sought information on the conditions to build equitable environments, I initially proposed to select superintendents from similar districts with varied levels of opportunity gaps ranging from minimal gaps to large gaps in learning between

Black and White students. Based upon the research on culturally relevant practices, I anticipated there could be a link between superintendent dispositions and actions that aligned most closely to culturally relevant practices and the effectiveness of their ability to close opportunity gaps (Houchen & Houchen, 2013; Howard, 2001; Howard & Terry, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner, 2011; Ware, 2006; Wiggins, 2008). In the end, however, there were not enough respondents to the study to engage in a maximal variation based on levels of existing gaps.

The criteria for selection of participants included the district's population of Black students, overall academic performance, location, local economy, and size of academic gap. The Midwestern State Department of Public Instruction has determined a subgroup population of students as measurable in their calculations for closing gaps if it reaches at least 20 students. Districts that are most likely to engage in work to address learning disparities for Black students would be those with schools considered to have a measurable population of students. For this study I selected from districts with populations of Black students at 20 or above, as this constituted a population high enough to be observed in data that would identify gaps in learning. Using this data from the Midwestern State Department of Public Instruction, I next eliminated districts whose Black student population made up more than 50%. The purpose of this was to examine cases where Black student culture would not be dominant in the school environment in order to examine how districts accommodated minority population cultures.

In order to better study the impact of culturally relevant practices as a factor in creating equitable learning environments, I also sought to control for the local economy and overall district performance. I selected districts that fell under the category of receiving primary aid only or negative tertiary aid in school funding from the state government as this would indicate that the district had greater access to local financial support in terms of resources (State

Equalization Aid, 2014). To further control for economics, all selected districts had a population of students with low socioeconomic status below 25 percent in order to minimize economic status as a contributor to learning gaps.

Relative to academic performance, each district had a record of high academic performance. The rationale for selecting districts with positive performance was to minimize overall teacher quality as a factor for the learning gaps in order to place greater emphasis on the culture of the learning environment. Further, the general public would expect positive learning outcomes for all students attending a district with a high performance rating. High performing districts included those with a state report card rating of “exceeds expectations” or “significantly exceeds expectations.” The state report card scores districts based on student achievement, student growth, closing gaps, on track to graduate and postsecondary readiness (Midwestern Accountability).

To solicit participants I developed a letter that informed superintendents about the purpose and details of the study (Creswell, 2007). I solicited all 47 superintendents in the districts that met criteria to participate in the study in order to maximize potential participants and in anticipation that superintendents would turn down participation in the study. Of those 47 superintendents, 8 responded and agreed to participate in the study.

## **Data Collection Methods**

### **Semi-structured interviews.**

In order to address the research question and sub questions around the conditions needed to build equitable learning environments I conducted one semi-structured interview with each superintendent as well as collected relevant educational statistics for each district. A semi-structured interview process consists of the use of pre-determined questions while providing

space for additional questions that may arise based on the response of the interviewee (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Whiting, 2008). While an observation of each leader could have revealed mannerisms, actions and interactions with others; the overall dispositions and actions of the leaders were best captured through one to one interviews where leaders provided greater detail of their work and a personal perspective (Creswell, 2012).

For each one to one interview, I gathered data using the digital voice recorder of a smart phone device. This device allowed me to capture both the questions and the full details of the responses, which I later transcribed. I also took written notes during the interview using an interview protocol tool. The interview protocol listed the questions to ask during the interview process and the recorded notes provided a back-up in the event that the recordings failed, which fortunately did not occur during the data collection process (Creswell, 2012). In addition to writing the interviewee's response, I took field notes on my thoughts and impressions around the responses and on the patterns I identified during the interview process, which served to inform the analysis process (Creswell, 2012).

I conducted one interview with each superintendent ranging from 60 to 90 minutes in length. The interview protocol was divided into three parts to address the following three main questions:

1. What is the disposition of the leader based upon his/her views of the problem and how to address it?
2. What actions has the superintendent planned or taken to address learning gaps district wide?
3. How does the environment of the district shape the Superintendent's actions?

The first part of the interview focused on building rapport with the superintendent and gathering information around his or her background. It also provided initial insight into the leader's disposition as it related to culturally relevant practices. The second part of the interview focused on background about the district. The purpose of these questions was to gain insight into the culture of the school district and how that culture influenced the actions and decision-making process of the superintendent around building equity. The third part of the interview examined the specific actions the superintendent proposed or implemented relative to building equity around Black student learning in the district. The purpose of these questions involved understanding how the district leader approached the issue of learning gaps in order to draw comparisons between the district's actions and culturally relevant practices.

Table 3.1 *Research questions, sub questions and purpose.*

Research Question	Interview Questions	Purpose
<b>Part I</b>		
What is the disposition of the leader based upon his/her views of the problem and how to address it?	<p>Tell me about yourself and your educational philosophy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What attracted you to work in this district?</li> <li>• What kinds of learning/experiences shaped your educational philosophy?</li> <li>• What kinds of learning/experiences prepared you for the position of superintendent?</li> </ul> <p>Part of the state's initiative to make all students college and career ready involves "promoting excellence for all" and closing achievement gaps that exist between White students and students of color:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do/did you see as the root cause or causes of the learning gaps between Black and White students?</li> <li>• What is the role of the</li> </ul>	<p>Build relationship and rapport with the leader</p> <p>Build understanding of his/her philosophy and leadership style</p> <p>Identify leader's background or experiences that may have shaped their dispositions and actions toward</p>

	<p>superintendent to address these gaps?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kinds of training or experiences might you have had that would prepare you to address these gaps?</li> <li>• What kind of preparation or tools does a superintendent need to be able to effectively address gaps?</li> </ul>	creating equity
<b>Part II</b>		
How does the environment of the district shape the Superintendent's actions?	<p>Describe your district:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the demographics of the community/ of the teachers, of the leaders?</li> <li>• What are the values of the community?</li> <li>• What is the district's vision/mission?</li> <li>• What are the district's primary goals?</li> <li>• What are your district's strengths?</li> <li>• What are your district's areas of challenge?</li> </ul> <p>What kinds of gaps or differences does your district see between White and Black students?</p> <p>What do you see as the role of the district in addressing identified gaps?</p> <p>What are the challenges/barriers to be able to address identified gaps?</p> <p>In terms of priorities for your district,</p>	<p>Deepen understanding of the culture of the district and the role the culture plays in shaping the actions of the superintendent in building equity.</p> <p>Understand district's actions under the superintendent's leadership around closing gaps for comparative analysis with culturally relevant practices</p>

	<p>where does the closing of gaps fall?</p> <p>How is this communicated to the different stakeholders in the district: Teachers, School Board, Students, and Local Community?</p>	
<b>Part III</b>		
What actions has the superintendent planned or taken to address learning gaps district wide?	<p>Disposition for the purpose of this research is defined as a person's inherent qualities of mind and character (Oxford Dictionary, 2015):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the dispositions that your district seeks when hiring building principals?</li> <li>• When hiring teaching staff?</li> </ul> <p>Does your district provide professional learning to leaders and/or teachers to address your identified gaps?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If yes, what does that learning look like/what types of learning are provided?</li> <li>• If no, what is/has been the focus of your professional learning offerings?</li> </ul> <p>What actions/strategies has/will/is the district taking to close the identified gaps?</p> <p>Depending on level of identified gaps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What strategies/actions would you identify as being most successful? Least successful?</li> <li>• What strategies might you be considering in the future?</li> </ul> <p>Are there any questions I may not have asked that you believe are relevant to understanding the district's attitudes and actions toward closing the learning gap for</p>	What actions has the superintendent planned or taken to address learning gaps district wide?



	Black students?	
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### **Document collection.**

While the study primarily focused on the voices of the participants collected through interviews, I also collected educational statistic data and information about the district from public websites. Creswell (2012) suggests that documents “provide valuable information in helping researchers understand central phenomena” (p.223). For the purposes of this study I collected data and district website information that supported a description of the district’s context including the demographics of the student population, educational statistics on academic performance and discipline and the district’s goals including the mission and vision statements. Educational statistic data included the areas of academic, discipline, graduation rate, attendance, and post-secondary enrollment by race for each district. I gathered this data using the Midwestern State Department of Public Instruction’s educational database system known as MidwesternDash. I also accessed the district’s goals including the mission and vision through each district’s website which informed the environmental factors that supported or negated the creation of more equitable learning environments.

The combination of semi-structured interviews with superintendents along with public document collection involving district data and goals, mission, and vision provided the information needed to examine the conditions under which each superintendent acted to build equitable learning environments for Black students.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Conducting research requires an awareness of the potential impact it will have on our participants. Glesne (2011a) discusses the use of an informed consent form with participants that provides them the following information: “participation is voluntary, any aspects of the research that might affect their well-being, that they may freely choose to stop participation” (p.166). Using similar wording I required each participant to sign a letter of consent prior to engaging in the study. The greatest risk posed to participants in this study involved social risk. District leaders shared thoughts about students, staff and aspects of the programs that could have run in opposition to their colleagues or peers. All participants were provided with a condensed copy of the research proposal that informed them of the goals of the research and how the data would be shared prior to signing the consent form.

I also needed to build relationships with the superintendents so they felt they could trust me as I discussed with them their work around building equitable learning environments and so that they trusted me to keep their confidentiality (Berger, 2013; Glesne, 2011a). In order to maintain anonymity I used pseudonyms for both the districts and the names of the study participants. I was the sole researcher of this study, making myself the sole keeper of the data, with access of the data provided only to my major professor and dissertation committee members.

I stored the data on my personal laptop hard drive as well as in a Google Drive so that I could share the information with my dissertation committee as needed. Participants also received access to review the findings of the study for the purpose of member checking and were provided with their individual pseudonyms (Creswell, 2007). I intend to hold onto the data on my hard drive for several years in the event that I wish to revisit the study or review the data

again to look for patterns I may have missed (James, 2012). Outside access to the data will not be provided without written consent of the participants involved (Glesne, 2011a).

## **Data Analysis Methodology**

### **Analysis procedures.**

In order to work through the analysis process I began by transcribing the recorded interviews and organizing them into files on the computer. I uploaded the transcribed data into the qualitative data software program *Atlas.ti*. The software served primarily as a support for my own coding and the themes that I developed reading through the data. The program allowed me to organize my data and more easily retrieve data linked to specific codes, themes, or memos (Creswell, 2007). James (2012) cautions that many of these qualitative software programs tend to turn qualitative data into quantitative data when the researcher should really be examining “not how many people said X with Y, but why they said it at all” (p. 7). In other words, if we rely solely on a software program to analyze our qualitative data, we miss out on the social complexities that may emerge from the data and dehumanize our participants. The software program provided assistance to me in developing codes and patterns, but did not serve as the sole method of data analysis.

I began the data review process by reading through each transcribed interview and creating codes. As I created new codes, I organized them into a coding dictionary, table 3.2, which defined the meaning of each term used to describe a section of data (Creswell, 2012). The dictionary also served the purpose of identifying similar codes to group together and reduce the number of codes used. Following this step I went back into the data to group similar codes together and begin to create families or themes. These themes and their relation to one another are shown in figure 3.1. I solicited my major professor to review the codes and families to

further examine the interpretation of the data in order to build credibility as well as identify any missing or misaligned information.

Table 3.2 *Coding dictionary from findings*

<b><i>Theme of Existing Opportunity Gaps: Gaps that Superintendents have described as existing in their district that lead to greater opportunity for White students and lower opportunity for Black students</i></b>	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Achievement Gap	The difference in standardized test scores and graduation rates from White to Black students with White students outperforming their Black peers
Knowledge gap	<p>A gap in knowledge for Black students and their families around how to navigate a majority white and middle class school system</p> <p><i>Ex. we also provide a college visit program where we select somewhere between 20 and 30 students to visit college campuses over spring break because those students their parents don't always understand how that works they don't even know what options they have</i></p>
Participation gap	Low numbers of Black students participating in extra-curricular activities and upper level coursework like Advanced Placement and honors courses as compared to White peers.
Technology gap	A gap in access to internet and/or a computer device due to issues of poverty
Discipline/behavior Gap	Inequities in how Black student behavior is addressed compared to White students, usually with more severe consequences and descriptive language
Inequity	<p>Black students' lack of access to technology, transportation, quality teachers, upper level courses and unequal disciplinary consequences that may lead to lower performance and engagement for Black students in districts</p> <p><i>ex. Maybe some of the afterschool types of things they don't always get involved in the non athletic ones because there are transportation</i></p>

	issues and things like that so.
<b>Theme of Causes of Opportunity Gaps for Black Students:</b> <i>Systemic issues that have created or perpetuated gaps within school districts in participation, knowledge, access, academics, discipline, etc. for Black students</i>	
Code	Definition
Cultural differences	<p>The teaching staff or building leaders that come from primarily White and middle class background/experiences causing a disconnect between them and Black students</p> <p><i>ex. you really need to double check yourself especially if we have grown up in primarily white environments we haven't been in urban environments necessarily or environments where we have African American students or students from other racial groups. what is our initial reaction and how much of that may be your own personal anxiety that plays out in a reaction to students</i></p>
Home environment	<p>Leaders description of factors in the home like low access to technology, internet, lack of a study space that could influence a student's ability to be successful in the school environment</p>
Packaged strategies	<p>The weakness of education to constantly relabel and repackage strategies</p> <p><i>Ex. Label it again by program that's fundamentally is a deterrent to having the leanest conversations and the strongest fast training</i></p>
Poverty	<p>Students and families from low income households whose socio-economic status creates a barrier to accessing technology, extra-curricular activities, and other educational supports that may result gaps in learning.</p>
Race	<p>The recognition of race as a major contributing factor to inequities for Black students</p> <p><i>Ex. mindset and bias, that you look at a black kid and assume that they can't or assume that they won't</i></p>

School Integration	A school integration program that was originally designed to bring Black students into suburban schools and bring White students into urban schools, but which ultimately did not meet its goal
Societal issues	Issues in American society stemming from slavery and resulting in continued inequitable treatment of the Black population  ex. more severe criminal punishments, desegregation and Black teacher shortage

***Theme of Barriers to change:*** Challenges that superintendents face when implementing changes that would promote more equitable learning environments for Black students

Code	Definition
Politics	<p>Push back from the state, local governing institutions, and existing community values that challenge the ability enact change/move away from traditional systems of education</p> <p><i>Ex, from a superintendent standpoint to reality is every year at least you've got three out of five board members who are voted in by the community who may not want to have you back so there are some political issues that could potentially come up and that's one of the big crisis in our country is at the average tenure in our superintendent positions are two and a half to three years and these are 10 year conversations that we need to have</i></p>

White privilege	<p>A resistance by a majority White community and/or teaching staff to make changes in a school system that would lead to greater equity for Black students, because of a sense that it would be result in taking something away from White students</p> <p><i>ex. I think much of white society would probably say oh no my child should get the same \$8,000 worth of stuff in fact maybe more because I know how to advocate than the black student and I think that's one of the dilemmas that we have that equal isn't necessarily equitable and so that's the battle that we have to fight.</i></p>
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<b><i>Theme Of Actions to Close Gaps:</i></b> Strategies taken by superintendents to close the opportunity gap for Black students and create more equitable educational environments	
<b>Theme of Student Supports:</b> Strategies implemented by the superintendent that directly address opportunity gaps for Black students	
Code	Definition
Assimilation	The notion that Black students who start and remain in the district K-12 will see greater success than students who transfer in mid-way through because they will have learned to comply with the norms and expectations of that district
Connections to higher education	The district partnerships with local colleges and universities to support student learning and increase post-secondary opportunities
Early literacy support	The district offers programing that supports the development of literacy skills for students even before they enter schools in the district (birth to kindergarten)
Engagement	The district seeks ways to involve students and parents in the participation of learning, extra-curricular activities, and providing feedback

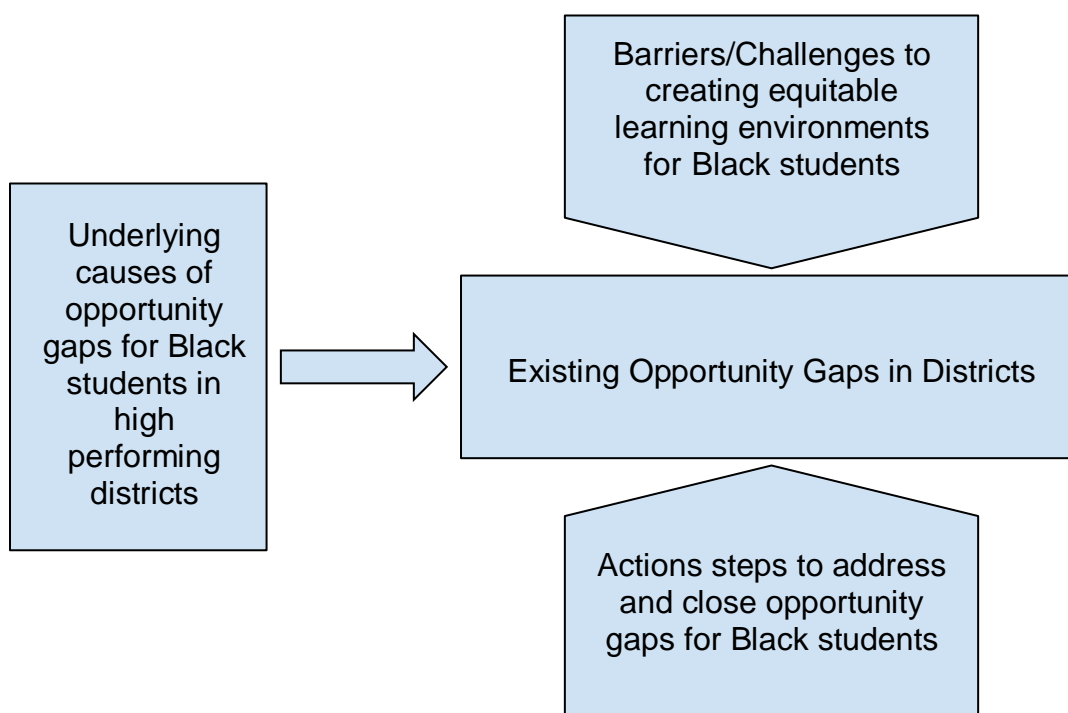
Equity Issues	The recognition that gaps exists in the system between Black and White students that prevent Black students from having equal access to successful outcomes. A need exists to provide more supports to Black students to give them equal access to successful outcomes.
Expectations	Teachers set high expectations for all students in the classroom
Relationships	Teachers and leaders fostering empathetic and respectful relationships with Black students and families
<b>Theme of Teacher Supports:</b> Professional learning for teachers that supports their ability to be more effective instructors of Black students	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Adult Capacity	<p>Training teachers to attain the skills and abilities to effectively support the growth of students in sub-group populations i.e. Black students, students with special needs, students in poverty</p> <p><i>ex. we do personalized opportunities for people and continuously meet with new staff for mentoring you know through coaching and evaluation identify areas where maybe staff members can grow</i></p>
Culturally Responsive training	Professional development, primarily aimed at teachers, designed to help them reflect on issues of racism and to provide instruction that is reflective of the cultures of the students in the classroom
Growth mindset	<p>A disposition in which a person continues to seek personal and professional growth, belief that learning never stops and we can always get better</p> <p><i>Ex. Willingness to take risks and try everything in the name of kids and then finish with the ability to withstand criticism</i></p>
Problem Solving	The ability or teachers and students to constantly seek out ways to improve performance by fixing problems in the



	<p>system or in the learning process</p> <p><i>ex. when we were looking at serving all children is how do you develop deep capacity of the adult to problem solve well for every child they are serving to make sure they can be successful in their post secondary transitions</i></p>
<b>Theme of Organizational Supports:</b> Changes made to the educational system as a whole (i.e. moving away from traditional education models) in order to create a more equitable learning environment for Black students.	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Awareness	Informing district stakeholders about the inequities between Black and White students and the negative impact on learning for Black students
Continuous improvement	District practice of continuously collecting and analyzing student performance data to adapt instructional practices to student needs
Culture	Superintendent's desire to reshape a district culture away from traditional models i.e. more inclusive, culturally responsive, data driven, solution focused
Recruit diverse staff	Actively recruiting staff of color to work in the district in order to make the staff more reflective of its student population
<b>Theme of Leader Dispositions:</b> The attitudes, beliefs and values held by each superintendent	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Community Support for Education	The community in which the district resides values a strong educational system
Diverse experiences	Leaders with experiences working with diverse student populations (Black, Latino, spec ed, ELL) and/or who have studied or lived in cultures outside of their own

Quality of life	<p>Desire to increase opportunities and access for students to ensure they have a positive quality of life within and as they leave the district</p> <p><i>ex. there are three kids two of which are minority students and now have middle class access and had nothing like that on the horizon so how do we personalize and customize that academic career plan to give kids hope.</i></p>
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**Figure 3.1 Four identified themes in the findings.**



### **Analytical approaches.**

#### ***Theoretical analysis.***

I sought to understand the conditions needed for superintendents to build equitable learning environments. As described in the theoretical framework, in order to understand some of those conditions needed to change systems, I used Culturally Relevant Theory supported by

Critical Race Theory as the lens through which I examined each leader's story. The analysis focused on how patterns and themes within each superintendent's story aligned to the themes within Culturally Relevant Theory and Critical Race Theory. Comparisons were made based on the three major questions within the study:

As part of the theoretical analysis, I asked three key questions:

1. How do the dispositions of the superintendents align to those dispositions seen in teachers and school leaders identified in the research around CRP?
2. How do the actions proposed or taken by the district under the leadership of the superintendent align to the recommended practices of CRP?
3. How does the environment of the district shape the Superintendent's actions?

Minimal or maximal alignment served to inform the needs for current and future superintendents to conduct similar efforts to build equitable learning environments.

### ***Cross case analysis.***

A second approach to the analysis process involved a cross case analysis of the collected data. I compared the cases based on the three main questions of the study on dispositions, actions and environment. The purpose of the cross case comparison was to identify "common and different" themes between the cases related to their stories and as they related to Culturally Relevant Theory and Critical Race Theory (Creswell, 2012, p.479). By comparing the cases I was able to identify potential factors to account for commonalities and differences in the actions taken by each superintendent around building equitable learning environments.

## **Presentation of Findings**

I organized my findings using a thematic approach, presenting patterns and common ideas from the interview data around types of opportunity gaps, underlying causes of gaps,

actions to create equity and challenges to implementing change toward equity (Glesne, 2011b). In order to provide greater engagement and understanding for the reader I provided a description of each superintendent and their district using educational statistics and quotes illustrating the personal philosophies of education. The use of longer quotes from the interviews allowed each leader to tell the story of their efforts to make a difference through the creation of more equitable learning environments.

### **Establishing Trustworthiness and Credibility in the Research Process**

In order to build an audience of readers I needed to establish myself as a credible researcher and within my dissertation I used a number of methods to build my credibility. I created validity in the data through the collection of additional data beyond the interview and through the use of rich description in the findings (Creswell, 2007). To validate the descriptions that each superintendent provided of their district, I also gathered data from a public educational statistic website, *MidwesternDash*. I gathered demographic data that supported their description of the district's population, academic data that supported their description of the high performance of the district and discipline data that reflected some of the gaps the leaders observed between Black and White students. I also collected information about each district's mission, vision and goals including the strategic plan directly from the district websites. As each superintendent described their action steps and how they prioritized closing gaps, I compared their responses to the descriptions of the districts goals and priorities found on the website. I found that the public documents supported the descriptions and stories from the superintendents. I further supported analysis of the data through the use of rich description of each superintendent's story and by drawing on support through the literature and past research on Culturally Relevant Practices (Creswell, 2007, Glesne, 2011b; Wolcott, 2009).

Following the interview process and after compiling my findings, I engaged in peer review and member checking. I provided a copy of the findings to my major professor for review and together we discussed potential meanings as well as how to organize the findings to tell the stories of the leaders (Creswell, 2007). I also sent copies of the findings chapter to each participant along with the name of their pseudonym to review the findings. This allowed the participants to discuss whether or not I misinterpreted their statements around the issues (Creswell, 2007). Each participant confirmed the accuracy of their statements within the findings. By involving the participants in this process, it also served to balance the power between myself as the researcher and those being researched, which helped me build trust with those involved (Berger, 2013).

A final component to establish trust and credibility involved the identification of my own bias as it related to the research, otherwise known as reflexivity (Berger, 2013; Creswell, 2007). I informed the reader of my professional background, ideology, and epistemology and how these shaped my research.

### **Reflexivity in the Research Process**

In order to make learning effective and meaningful for children and adults alike, those in an instructional position must develop a deeper understanding of their students' backgrounds and culture. They must identify key skills and teach them through a context that builds connections and makes the experience meaningful. This perspective led me to develop research that centers on how teachers, instructional leaders, and educational systems can create an experience for students that make connections to their culture and backgrounds in order to create meaningful learning that also serves to raise their level of achievement and success.

Educational researchers like Banks (1995) and Ladson-Billings (1995) define the creation of a cultural connection to students and learning as Culturally Relevant Practices (CRP). They cite culturally relevant or relevant pedagogy and practice as the key component to increase learning for students of color (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Bales & Saffold, 2011). Ladson-Billings (1995) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469). The creators of the educational system in the United States did not build it with a diverse population in mind, but rather prescribed pedagogy to meet the learning needs of a White, middle and upper class society. The result involves the maintenance of White culture as the culture of power and a lowered level of learning and achievement for many student of color (Decuir & Dixon, 2004). Through my work with an increasingly diverse population of students, and the continuation my education on urban schooling and issues of racial inequality, I saw how the educational system functioned as a barrier to the learning and advancement of students of color. We need to shift our focus to the populations of students that the system marginalizes and focus our efforts on creating a learning environment that raises them up. Shifting towards a culturally relevant model of education can move us there.

The process of data analysis in qualitative research challenges us, the researchers, to account for how our own lens, through which we view the world, including our values, beliefs, and position among other human beings, impacts how we interpret what we see and hear. Our ontology or reality as well as our axiology or values impact how we relate and compare ourselves against those we research and the types of interactions we allow ourselves to have. All of these notions fall under what Berger (2013) defines as reflexivity or “the process of a

continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicitly recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome" (p.2). Reflexivity influences our ability to access fields of study, our relationship with those we research, and how we shape our findings and conclusions. Our level of understanding of ourselves impacts the quality and depth of the study we conduct.

My experiences in the educational field as well as the beliefs I hold help and challenge my research on CRP. My years as an educator and an administrator allowed me to play an insider role as a researcher interviewing district leaders. The position of insider helped build credibility with those I interviewed because I understood the system of education, especially as it existed in White, suburban and affluent areas, having worked in those same systems for close to ten years. As an insider I also had advanced knowledge of the content that allowed me to take conversations to a greater depth, creating richer descriptions of the field (Berger, 2013). At the same time, having background knowledge about CRP and experiences with a system-wide implementation also carried risk in terms of how I analyzed and interpreted the descriptions that I gathered.

Berger (2013) cautions that "bringing the researcher into the researched carries the danger of researcher's self-involvement to the degree that it blocks hearing other voices" (p.7). As I gathered and analyzed data I needed to ask myself how much I would share of my own experiences and knowledge with the work. I did not want to lose descriptions of the process that could change the analysis or development of themes in the data. I monitored how much of my own experience I chose to insert into the conversation with each leader, preferring to give them the space to tell their stories as they saw it. On minimal occasions I would share a detail of my own experience to demonstrate that I understood both the value of their work and the struggles

they faced in order to strengthen the trust between participant and researcher. I also reserved judgment about practices in the field of study that varied from what I knew in my own work, which was minimal, but which could have shaped my interpretation of the data. In order to minimize judgments and balance the experiences of those I researched I utilized strategies like member checking and peer review (Berger, 2013).

I hope that this study can inform school district leaders around the state how to approach building equitable learning environments for Black students by closing opportunity gaps in the educational system. From an ideological and experiential standpoint, I have my own beliefs about how to go about this work. However, in this study I did not use my concluding statements as a soap box for how school leaders should do their job based on a single case and personal experience. Rather, through this study I constructed a conclusion that summarized the key themes found in the cases, and I presented recommendations for future studies and for implications for leaders working to address gaps (Wolcott, 2009). Although the ability to monitor my own position as a researcher in relation to those that I researched brought a new level of complexity to the process, and I also believe it brought greater depth and meaning to this study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The focus of this study was to examine the dispositions of district leaders who work in high achieving, majority White districts with notable gaps between Black students and their grade level peers. Although the study design is appropriate for the research questions, readers should note several limitations. First, although the findings appeared nearly consistent across the interviews of all eight leaders, the predictability to see these same dispositions, actions and barriers in other similar districts is limited. Second, the study solicited from a pool of 46



superintendents. Only these eight leaders responded. The consistency in dispositions, action and barriers may result because these leaders recognized that they have been active in their work to address gaps for Black students and felt comfortable discussing their work. Soliciting leaders without indicating a specific population like Black students or without specifying an interest in understanding how they close gaps, may have yielded a more varied participant field and, in turn, altered responses around dispositions, actions and barriers.

The limited number of respondents and the nature of multiple case study also reduces the ability to generalize the findings to leaders in other high performing, majority White districts experiencing opportunity gaps with Black students. Factors like socioeconomic class, geographic location, ethnic or cultural demographics and so forth may influence leaders' actions and dispositions as well as barriers they face to close gaps. Other areas that may account for variations in the findings include the age, experience and gender of leaders. Furthermore, the number of leaders studied here does not provide a large enough sample to determine how those factors impact, actions, dispositions or barriers around gaps.

The leaders each provided descriptions of the political leanings, education and general socioeconomic status of the district community. Several conclusions in the study about the impact of environments were drawn based upon the leaders' own descriptions of these environmental factors. These conclusions could be strengthened by seeking additional information about each district's political leanings like voting patterns in national, state and local elections. Census data could also provide information on the education, age, and economic status of community residents.

How the leaders responded during the interview might also be a limiting factor. Having met with each leader just once, a relationship was not fully established. The lack of a relationship may have limited how much they were willing to share about themselves, their actions and the challenges to close gaps. Further, there is limited ability to check the validity of their statements. Beyond member checking, the district web pages; mission, vision, and goal statements; and other district documentation like data provided little information regarding how the districts addressed gaps for Black students. That said, the consistency of responses between cases, especially as it relates to dispositions and challenges to closing gaps may have implications for future needs of superintendents as well as for future studies. These consistencies, along with the other findings, are discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4: The Stories of Eight Superintendents Working Towards More Equitable Learning Environments in the Face of a Highly Politicized and Racialized Society**

Significant gaps in academic performance between Black and White students remain a focus of discussion among educational researchers (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Theoharis, 2009). One might assume that the Black students attending high performing schools would experience educational growth and success similar to their White peers because they would have access to the same high quality teachers and instructional resources. Data in the state, however, shows that Black students continue to perform below White peers even in districts that standardized assessment data identifies as high performing (MidwesternDash). Data collected from the districts around the state between 2011 and 2014 reveal that the majority of Black students attending identified high performing districts may face gaps in reading and math achievement ranging from 20 to 45 or more percentage points below White peers, are at greater risk than White peers of not graduating from high school, and are suspended at higher rates than White peers (MidwesternDash). When faced with these academic and discipline discrepancies between Black and White students, current and future district leaders have a decision to make: maintain the status quo or address issues in the system effecting these struggling populations.

In this chapter I will tell the stories of eight superintendents in high performing, majority White districts who have set out to implement more equitable practices for Black students in the face of highly political and racialized suburbs. Part one of the findings chapter begins by providing the context for each of the eight cases of superintendents including the demographics and academic gaps pulled from the educational data portal, MidwesternDash. Also included in the context is a description of the political climate of each district based upon the descriptions

provided by the leaders in their interviews. Finally I will share each leader's educational philosophy that shapes how she or he leads.

Part two of this chapter explores the common findings across the eight cases relative to the gaps they identify between White and Black students. Part three then explores the superintendent's perceived underlying causes of the gaps, the supports they have identified or implemented to close gaps and the challenges they face to create environments of equity. With that said I invite readers into the stories of eight superintendents as they challenge the status quo in their districts to begin to address the inequities facing Black students. For educators aspiring to take on the role of superintendency in the first/second/third ring suburban districts, their stories may provide vital insight into the struggles and successes around efforts to close gaps and build for equitable learning environments for Black students and for all students.

## **Part 1: The Settings and Philosophies of Eight District Leaders**

### **Dr. James Davis, Superintendent of Birchwood School District.**

The Birchwood School District serves close to 900 students in a kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade school system. The White student population makes up 71% of students followed by 12 percent Black, 7% Asian, 5% Hispanic and 3% two or more races of students. The district has a student population from a low socioeconomic status of 12%. In terms of academic performance on the MKCE from 2011-12 to 2013-14, the average reading proficiency for Black students was 45% lower than White peers and the average math proficiency for Black students was 50% lower than White peers. The Birchwood District has a highly educated, moderate to liberal and affluent population overall.

Birchwood's superintendent, Dr. Davis, has served in education for 29 years with 25 of those years as an administrator. He has worked as the superintendent of Birchwood for three years. He spent his previous years as an administrator in multiple districts with high populations of Latino/a students as well as those from low income households. He credited his experiences raising his own children to his success as a school and district leader because it allowed him to recognize that children learn differently and have different needs and interests. He described these beliefs in the following statements:

You know kids are going to learn things when it's relevant to them, when it has meaning to them, when they are interested in it, not necessarily when we say third graders should learn fractions or whatever. I think there's a lot of assumptions about what you know. Especially when we are dealing with kids of different socioeconomic status, different race and ethnicity, their lives are so different, their motivations are so different, and we talk about the motivation of grades but you know that doesn't motivate many kids who are impoverished or hungry or whatever else. (Davis, 2015 interview)

Dr. Davis described his role as assuring that all students have access to the highest quality educators in Birchwood. Here, he discussed his role in greater detail:

I really look at my job as to just improve the quality of life of students, that really is the way feel and the way you do that is to have high expectations for students. You care about them, you know and we hire teachers here who have high expectations for kids, are very very, all of the teachers we hire here are very experienced people, we don't hire anybody with less than 5 years generally, usually they have their masters, but they also

have that love of kids, that genuine concern and joy of helping kids to be successful.

(Davis, 2015 interview)

Dr. Davis demonstrated a passion to identify ways in which to improve the educational experience for all students.

**Dr. Harold Dunn, Superintendent of Cherry Grove School District.**

The Cherry Grove School District serves around 2100 students in a kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade school system. The White student population makes up 66% followed by 13 percent Black, 10% Asian, 6% Hispanic and 5% two or more races of students. The district has a student population from a low socioeconomic status of 19%. In terms of academic performance on the MKCE from 2011-12 to 2013-14, the average reading proficiency for Black students was 41% lower than White peers and the average math proficiency for Black students was 48% lower than White peers. Cherry Grove, on average, had 2 to 3 fewer Black students graduate compared to White peers 2012-2014. In 2015 100% of Black students graduated from the district. Politically, Cherry Grove aligns itself with liberal to moderate beliefs.

Dr. Dunn was in his first year as the superintendent for his district. He had prior experience working as an administrator in both rural and urban settings and sought the challenge of leadership in a more diverse school district. He described his desire to take on challenging conversations about race here:

I think being able to truly work through conversations and issue regarding race and regarding privilege in a high performing district was one of the primary challenges that I look forward to and have begun to work through in some cases. (Dunn, 2015 interview)

He credited his urban focused principal leadership training along with his work building relationships with African American families in a previous district as the experiences that helped to prepare him to take on the superintendent role and to focus on closing gaps for Black students. He valued building connections with stakeholders in the district and saw this as the key to implementing change and moving education forward. He described the importance of the work in the following quote:

You really need to reach out and listen to people and talk to people so I think that been something that's been really helpful to be and then to be able to also connect with the community and have that outreach as a superintendent of the district. It is really important and being able to have good mentors people that have been in the position and have done well. I can take some practices here and there. (Dunn, 2015 interview)

As a new superintendent he also recognized the importance of having a mentor or coach through whom he could consult and gather ideas. Dr. Dunn carried with him the teachings from his urban leadership program and the voices of his mentors to navigate his first year as a superintendent.

**Dr. John Harris, Superintendent of Hickory Hills School District.**

The Hickory Hills School District serves around 7000 students in a kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade school system. The White student population makes up 73% followed by 3 percent Black, 14% Asian, 6% Hispanic and 4% two or more races of students. The district has a student population from a low socioeconomic status of 10%. In terms of academic performance on the MKCE from 2011-12 to 2013-14, the average reading proficiency for Black students was 30% lower than White peers and the average math proficiency for Black students was 39% lower than

White peers. Hickory Hills, on average, had 2 to 3 fewer Black students graduate compared to White peers 2012-2015. Hickory Hills is considered a conservative leaning district politically with primarily middle to upper class residents.

Dr. Harris of Hickory Hills has served the district in his current role for the last four years. He stated that the community had high expectations for their educational system and were willing to spend money on the system as long as it produced high level results.

Dr. Harris had prior experience as a high level administrator in a smaller mostly White and affluent suburban district and a mid-sized urban district with populations of Latino students at 20% and students from low income households around 35%. He credited his passion for supporting and assuring equity for the neediest students from his work in the urban district. Herein he described how he developed a desire to support the neediest students:

It's there that my fuel for the underdog was gained I was the principal [in a school] which was nicknamed the ghetto school in that community by even the politicians and so I had a chance to be part of the turnaround experience there. (...) It was a target rich place for underdogs and I really found that leadership matters. It's probably one of my most fond memories of being an educator is watching literally kids' lives change. (Harris, 2015 Interview)

He also credited his experiences as a parent raising two children to his success as a leader. He saw the parent perspective as a valued asset to supporting the needs of all students.

Dr. Harris demonstrated passion for assuring that every student had the opportunity to succeed and sought to push forth changes in education that would provide more authentic and engaging learning experiences. Here he listed his many educational mantras:



Every student, every time, all the time. If students fail, we failed students. If not us then in some cases it's no one for them. Every student can do this you just have to find a way period put a floor in and take the ceiling off for kids. (Harris, 2015 Interview)

He placed the responsibility of assuring student success on the educational system and also held his system accountable when students did not experience success.

**Dr. Mary Green, Superintendent of Maple Leaf Community School District.**

The Maple Leaf Community School District serves around 4050 students in a kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade school system. The White student population makes up 75% followed by 8% Black, 7% Asian, 5% Hispanic and 5% two or more races of students. The district has a student population from a low socioeconomic status of 16%. In terms of academic performance on the MKCE from 2011-12 to 2013-14, the average reading proficiency for Black students was 28% lower than White peers and the average math proficiency for Black students was 36% lower than White peers. Maple Leaf's reading gap has gone down three points and its math gap has gone down 8 points over 3 years from 2011 to 2014. Maple Leaf has had a 100% graduation rate for Black students from 2013 to 2015 (MidwesternDash).

Maple Leaf is a moderate to conservative leaning district politically. Most residents have a middle class income and blue collar jobs. The district has a strong manufacturing base and a deep commitment to education.

Dr. Green has served the Maple Leaf Community School district as the superintendent for the last four years. She previously worked in a largely White and conservative suburban district as a superintendent. She has also held various positions as an assistant superintendent, principal,

associate principal and assistant professor. As a teacher she held licenses in special education and reading.

Dr. Green supported a strong continuous improvement system in education as key to creating positive learning outcomes for students. She described her hopes for the school system in the following statement:

I think the biggest piece that when we were looking at serving all children is how do you develop deep capacity of the adult to problem solve well for every child they are serving to make sure they can be successful in their post-secondary transitions whatever those are and then position the kids so that they are employable in all employable markets with family supporting wages, feel connected to school feel a sense of belonging and they know where to get help. (Green, 2015 Interview)

She credited her learning around systems beyond the educational field for shaping her abilities as a leader and helping her to grow. In this passage she detailed her key takeaways from the private sector:

The biggest gift was actually looking at various learning principles out of sector and on what they apply to healthcare improvement, what they apply to organizational improvement and adult learning and the principles that actually drive sound problem solving and the tools and strategies around that within organizations. (...) How you operate the organization has to be around effective problem solving research systems, research and adult learning theory and motivation. How do you build a culture that people want to work in and students want to learn in and none of that comes from the education field. (Green, 2015 Interview)

Her leadership philosophy derived from ideas beyond just the educational sector and focus on organizational change and the strengthening of organizational culture to provide individualized support for all of her students.

**Dr. Gregory Jones, Superintendent of the Oak Park Area School District.**

The Oak Park Area School District serves around 7000 students in a kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade school system. The White student population makes up 74% followed by 5% Black, 8% Asian, 8% Hispanic and 5% two or more races of students. The district has a student population from a low socioeconomic status of 18%. In terms of academic performance on the MKCE from 2011-12 to 2013-14, the average reading proficiency for Black students was 38% lower than White peers and the average math proficiency for Black students was 47% lower than White peers. Oak Park reduced its reading gap by 5 points and its math gap by 5 points over three years from 2011 to 2014. Thirty-five fewer Black students graduated compared to White peers on average from 2011 to 2014. In 2014-15, the district reduced this gap to 25.

The Oak Park Area School District is liberal to moderate with pockets of conservative groups. Dr. Jones described the board as a group of all of political viewpoints who can put politics aside to make decisions in the best interests of the students. The community is primarily middle to upper class.

Dr. Jones has served the district for 9 years as the superintendent. Prior to that role he worked for 11 years as a director of curriculum and as a superintendent in a suburban area. He believed that education should go beyond academics to support the development of the whole child and the adults in the organization. This passage from Dr. Jones provides greater detail around that belief:

I would kind of view it as more of a global all inclusive sort of human being so I think that what I am most interested in is developing or allowing and helping students and adults in our organization develop the many sort of elements of being human part of that is academic and achievement oriented and part of that is sort of that personal social and emotional fulfillment, part of that would be the sort of physical experience of living, part of it would be the natural world. (Jones, 2015 Interview)

In addition to supporting an educational environment that supports the development of well-rounded individuals, he also believed his mission was to assure that the adults within and outside of the organization act in an inclusive manner to accept, and work effectively with, all students. He described his perspective on his role as the leader here:

[My role is] to change hearts and minds and to lead efforts to eliminate the inequalities and the inequities which would be demonstrated by graduation rates, employment rates, acceptance into college and the comfort and receptiveness of white people of minorities in the district we need to sort of have a district that is truly open and receptive to it welcoming to really all races. (Jones, 2015 Interview)

He saw himself as the person who would lead the charge to recognize not only that gaps exist in his district, but also that race and racial bias play a role in how gaps develop for students of color.

**Ms. Erica Wilson, Superintendent of Pinedale Schools.**

The Pinedale School District serves around 475 students in a kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade school system. The White student population makes up 68% followed by 13% Black, 9% Asian, 7% Hispanic and 4% two or more races of students. The district has a student population

from a low socioeconomic status of 11%. In terms of academic performance on the MKCE from 2011-12 to 2013-14, the average reading proficiency for Black students was 30% lower than White peers and the average math proficiency for Black students was 35% lower than White peers. Pinedale's reading gap has gone down 13 points and its math gap has closed by 7 points in the last 3 years from 2011-12 to 2013-14. Ms. Wilson described the district as a highly educated community that values its smallness and the ability to provide enriching experiences to students through the arts and music. The community is tight knit due to its size and leans liberal to moderate in its politics.

Ms. Wilson was in her second year with the Pinedale district, previously holding positions in a mid-sized urban district as an educator of special education, a director of curriculum, and a student services director.

She attributed her passion to lead and to pursue actions to close gaps to her coursework for the director of pupil services license. The discussions in her courses focused on social justice theory and the oppression or marginalization of certain student populations, which inspired her to address these issues in her leadership positions.

She described her philosophy on education as meeting the needs of the whole child and her role as a superintendent as ensuring inclusive practices that support positive outcomes for all students. Here she reflected on her educational philosophy:

When I think about my philosophy I chuckle when you say "oh you're in a high-performing District", high-performing by whose standards and high performing for what kids and what does that really mean? Just an attention to you know a whole child approach and kind of that perspective of reaching all learners and understanding what

leadership behaviors and organizational behaviors you have that maybe are impeding the progress of kids. What are we doing that is inadvertently marginalizing certain groups? So really an inclusive perspective, one that creates opportunities one that spoke to give ownership to kids of their learning when you think of those big philosophical ideas I really feel that in this role your whole job is to build capacity for the organization whether it's for teaching staff your paras and your parents and your kids. What do you do to create the conditions for all those things to happen? (Wilson, 2015 Interview)

She believed educational institutions had the power to either marginalize students or to open up learning opportunities for them and that the leader had the responsibility to assure that the latter scenario occurred. She also acknowledged that having the label of a high performing district was not an excuse to sit back and allow the district to move along as it always had. Until all students performed at a high level, she saw room for improvement.

**Dr. Joseph Thomas, Superintendent of the Spruceland School District.**

The Spruceland School District serves around 2650 students in a kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade school system. The White student population makes up 77% followed by 3% Black, 5% Asian, 12% Hispanic and 2% two or more races of students. The district has a student population from a low socioeconomic status of 25%. In terms of academic performance on the MKCE from 2011-12 to 2013-14, the average reading proficiency for Black students was 29% lower than White peers and the average math proficiency for Black students was 30% lower than White peers. Spruceland had a 15 point reduction in its math gap between 2011-12 and 2013-14. The Spruceland district community is described by Dr. Thomas as fiscally conservative and socially progressive. He also states that the community values traditional approaches to education.

Dr. Thomas served the district for three years before resigning from the position. He had 22 years of experience in education with the majority of those years spent in the southeastern United States in rural and urban districts with diverse student populations. He held other leadership positions as an assistant principal, principal and assistant superintendent. He credited the diversity of his experiences in the South along with the leaders from his doctoral program in administrative leadership as helping to prepare and shape him in his role as a district leader.

He saw the role of the superintendent as being a voice for all students and families and as helping to foster change to reshape and move education forward. This statement from Dr. Thomas reflected that belief:

You know its public education and it's about everyone it's not just about the traditional way of doing things all the time or if not just about kids who you know the top 20% (Thomas, 2015 Interview).

He recognized that traditional methods of education caused gaps in learning for students who did not fit neatly into the system, and he sought out methods in which to engage learners of all backgrounds and abilities to improve the system. Later he reflected on students' engagement in the learning process:

How do we make learning relevant significance of that all students are engaged and buying in and I think you know the number one way to do that would be inquiry based instruction. I have been trained in inquiry based instruction from the beginning and I think it's a way to make learning relevant to each student's individual situation. (Thomas, 2015 Interview)

He sought to move education from a model that had one size for all to a model that individualized the learning through recognition by capitalizing on the differences of students through the use of real world, problem solving scenarios.

**Dr. Mark Greben, Superintendent of Tamarack Area Schools.**

The Tamarack Area Schools serves around 5400 students in a kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade school system. The White student population makes up 66% followed by 7% Black, 4% Asian, 19% Hispanic and 4% two or more races of students. The district has a student population from a low socioeconomic status of 26%. In terms of academic performance on the MKCE from 2011-12 to 2013-14, the average reading proficiency for Black students was 38% lower than White peers and the average math proficiency for Black students was 44% lower than White peers. In Tamarack, 19 fewer Black students graduated on average between 2012 and 2014 compared to White peers. While the average gap seems high, the district has reduced its graduation gap by 10 points over 3 years.

The community consists of mostly middle and upper class, educated White families. Dr. Greben described the spoken political leanings of the community as liberal or progressive, but acknowledges that their actions often reflect a more conservative perspective.

Dr. Greben has spent 29 years in education with 11 of those years as the superintendent of his current district. His discourse often reflected the disconnect that existed in the community between their professions to embrace diversity and support equity and their pushback when changes occurred that supported students of marginalized populations. He described this hypocrisy in the following statement:



These liberals over here that just professed we are all about equality and yet their rhetoric is just absolutely the opposite of their actions (Greiben, 2015 Interview).

Dr. Greben credited much of his leadership style and drive to support marginalized students to the recent birth of his child. This event helped him to better recognize the needs and opportunities that exist for students based on their status in society:

It has become so much more personal after the birth of my son. It's because I see all of the opportunities that he has and then you weigh why aren't those opportunities available for every child. Not that every child would necessarily avail themselves if they were available but they have to have a choice. (Greiben, 2015 Interview)

He wanted all students to have the same chance at achieving success regardless of race, social class and ability. He sought to flip the common belief of American Society that one must work hard or achieve a certain status to earn opportunities. Here he detailed how that belief played into his educational philosophy:

My educational philosophy, my vision is that every child succeeds so that is my vision every child and so “every” is intentional and “succeeds” is broad enough that success is going to look different for every child from the most medically, intellectually challenged kids to our brightest kids. It is going to look different and then attached to that is my belief that the old way of thinking is based on meritocracy though the old way of thinking is you have to prove yourself in order to have opportunity so you have to have success before you have opportunity and in my work and my belief is to flip that. You have to have opportunities to be successful. (Greiben, 2015 Interview)

He saw his role as an advocate for all learners and as an agent of change for the district to help reshape the way the community viewed and thought about the educational process.

## **Part 2: Exploring the Commonalities in Identified Gaps**

The Department of Education in the Midwestern state provides annual data to the public regarding the performance of each publicly funded school and district in the state on a site called *MidwesternDash* or the *Midwestern Information System for Education: Data Dashboard*. Here the average citizen can easily access data showing the performance gaps by academic subject between Black and White students based on standardized assessments taken by students each year. When talking about gaps for Black students, academic achievement is often the first and most referenced gap. The superintendents within this study, however, recognized that the gaps for this population go far deeper than just academic gaps measured by a standardized assessment. The second part of this chapter explores the existing opportunity gaps for Black students in each district as identified by the superintendents including discipline gaps, as gaps of access involving co-curriculars and advanced coursework, knowledge gaps around systems of education and gaps in technology access.

### **Inequity in the level and frequency of discipline for Black students.**

Two of the leaders in the study cited key differences around how teachers approached discipline for Black students compared to their approach for White students. Dr. Davis of Birchwood and Dr. Dunn of Cherry Grove described as a major issue the significant disparities in terms of how teachers disciplined Black students compared to White students for similar infractions or minimal infractions of behavior. They connected these disparities in the treatment of Black students to bias that existed within some of the educators and within the discipline

system itself. Dr. Davis noted that more veteran staff members had conflicts with Black students than others because they relied heavily on traditional measures of discipline used with the White students they have instructed over the years. Here he described how his staff had to learn to adjust their approaches based on the lived experiences of the students:

Getting in his face may have been the way to do it 20 years ago, but it doesn't work. It doesn't work for that particular type of kid and his environment and you're not enabling him, at least that's what [the teacher] thinks is you're just enabling him. Well I mean, there's a different culture, different way of thought, a different lived experience that [Black students] have and I think that you know, some of [the teachers] are now seeing that and they're like yeah, you know, to have success with that kid is, you know, a different approach. And the posturing doesn't work and the getting in their face doesn't work. (Davis, 2015 Interview)

He noted that the teachers have begun to recognize that the differences in their lived experiences may differ from their students, requiring them to approach discipline in another manner.

Dr. Dunn described several conflicts that arose between the teaching staff and the administration related to issues of disproportionate discipline for Black students. The Midwestern Department of Public Instruction also brought to light the disproportionality of Black students receiving more consequences and more severe consequences than White peers for similar infractions. Dr. Dunn spoke to the biases he observed in how some teachers responded to White students versus Black students:

A teacher might describe one student as ‘mischievous’ like how a nephew would act at a birthday party or as ‘terrifying’ and how much of those behaviors are truly different and what should be done with the student (Dunn, 2015 Interview).

He also noted teachers have differing reactions to the same behavior of a student depending on that student’s race. He connected the disparities in discipline to the academic gaps described above:

What is our initial reaction and how much of that may be your own personal anxiety that plays out in a reaction to students, which I think at least in our case plays itself out in suspension rates and graduation rates and achievement because the students are suspended and are out of school and feel disenfranchised from their teacher here and the support that they should be getting from their schools (Dunn, 2015 Interview).

His comments demonstrated an understanding of the ripple effect that one inequity has on the educational system. This reflection runs parallel to research on how teachers with negative attitudes, low expectations, and minimal experience working with students outside of their cultural group can inhibit the academic performance of students of color in their classrooms (Barnes, 2006; Gay, 1978; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Morrison et. al., 2008) In this case, inequitable discipline measures resulted in greater absences for Black students which contributed directly to gaps in their opportunity to learn and in turn their academic achievement.

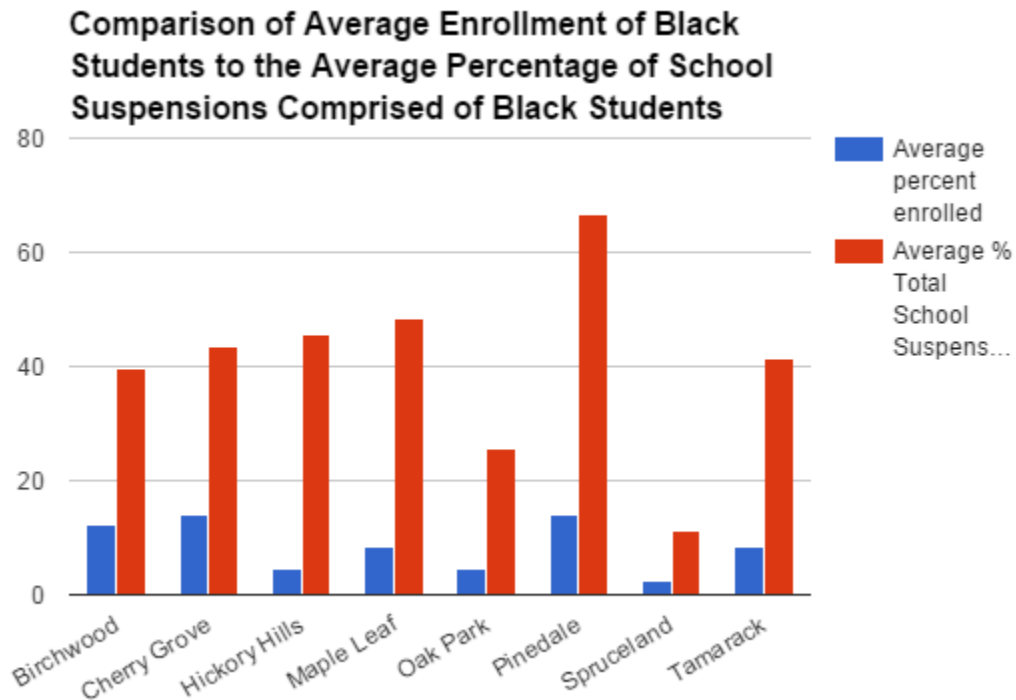
Dr. Dunn also noted that the discipline issues he saw stemmed from issues of engagement in the classroom. In particular, the lessons did not connect with the students, cultural differences existed in the lesson or a lesson was described as boring and then students chose not to comply. He provided an example of a case between a White teacher and Black student in her district:

We have to have conversations specifically about how are you changing your teaching practices to include him in the classroom. This isn't a special ed. referral kid. He might have EBD but he's not like "f\*\*\* you I'm getting out of here" type of thing. It's more like "can you stop talking cuz I'm bored" so [the teacher] views that as incredibly disrespectful and somebody who just needs to sit down and listen versus the principal sitting out in the same lesson and saying like "I was bored listening to that lesson because you're talking too much." You've got to engage kids and small groups in discussion (Dunn, 2015 Interview)

The statements Dr. Davis and Dr. Dunn related to the higher incidences of discipline issues and the impact on learning for Black students showed a recognition of larger issues in the staff culture as well as how the curriculum is enacted. This recognition reflects Ladson Billings' (1995a) Culturally Relevant Theory, which described how an educational system focused on the values of White culture may impede learning for students of color.

While the other six leaders did not speak at length to the behavior gap between Black and White students, a review of suspension rate data collected from MidwesternDash illuminated the disproportionality across all eight districts. The average percentage of Black students suspended in 7 of 8 districts from 2011 to 2014 is disproportionate to the enrollment of Black students in the districts. Figure 4.1 illustrates this data.

Figure 4.1 *Enrollment and Suspensions of Black Students*



The high rates of suspension of Black students helps to explain some of the academic gaps observed by the leaders. High rates of suspension mean that these students miss significant classroom time resulting in a direct loss of the opportunity to and the greater potential for the students to fall behind academically. The bias demonstrated by teachers towards how they discipline Black student compared to White students as described by Dr. Davis and Dr. Dunn illustrates how a Black student in a high performing district could be set up to fail academically. Bias and disproportionality in the discipline of Black students may also impact their ability or their desire to participate in extracurricular activities further reducing engagement and a connection in the school community.

**Inequality for Black students created by gaps of access.**

Gaps of access refers to a Black student's ability to participate in the educational system at the same level and frequency as White peers. All eight leaders identified one or more access gaps related to participation in advanced level-coursework, access to knowledge about opportunities in the educational system, participation in extra-curricular activities and access to technology used by the school system. They viewed these access gaps as major contributors to inequality for Black students within their districts.

***Inequities in access to enroll in advanced level coursework.***

Among the districts that included curriculum through grade 12, the leaders recognized low participation rates of Black students in advanced level coursework like Advanced Placement courses and Honors courses. Research about opportunity gaps for Black students commonly identifies this as an issue contributing to the low levels of academic achievement observed for this population (Ford, 2010). The leaders in this study expressed concerns also regarding the low participation rates of Black students in upper level coursework, how schools place Black students into lower tracks and how the culture of the schools may influence their participation in these areas.

Dr. Davis spoke to how the tracking system and socioeconomics in his district led to a higher proportion of Black students in remedial level work:

You have lower ability kids in lower ability tracks and once there, the research says once they are in a lower track they are always going to be in that and teachers have less expectations for them and they don't perform at a high level, often the class is filled with, 30% minority population in a school and it's a lower track usually 25% of those kids are

people of color, you know so anything that would uh allow that is just wrong. (Davis, 2015 Interview)

We have a summer school program here but you know it's remediation, that's it. And 90% of the kids in that are African American, so on the one hand it's too bad and on the other hand we know that in terms of the achievement gap, it just gets exponentially larger over the summer because of the type of experience our kids have. A lot of our kids go to summer school at [local elementary school] and you pay like \$400 to go to summer school and their parents can afford it and then there are these kids who can't afford to do that type of enrichment stuff. So you're doing remediation type stuff and we try to make it a nice environment, but you look around and it's all the poor Black kids in your class. (Davis, 2015 Interview)

Similar to the tracking system identified by Dr. Davis, Dr. Jones, in the Oak Park School District, expressed concern on how Black students become involved or not in upper level coursework.

Are we encouraging and ensuring that we have strong representation of minority groups in our honors and AP curriculum? The high school offers 156 university credits so are we ensuring that the Black and Latino students are enrolling and being successful or do we sort of unknowingly or unthinkingly discourage them from taking those classes or is it more about the Whites know how the system works and the Blacks don't. (Jones, 2015 Interview)

Dr. Greben, with Tamarack Area Schools, expressed a level of disgust for the lack of access Black students have to the talented and gifted programming within the district.



Our talented and giftedness has been really interesting. This is where privilege really rears its ugly head. I mean really you talk about scarcity, oh gosh, so just the identification process and then the delivery process. We are terrible at it, but we are really tuned into it and I don't even want to talk about it, it is just so ugly. We had a group do a study of us and no surprise we suck at all levels not just disproportionality and what are we going to do about it and it's just I don't know. (Geben, 2015 Interview)

The leaders recognized how their school systems have traditionally tracked Black students into lower level coursework or how the system has not encouraged them to enroll in challenging courses. They acknowledged that their Black student populations make up a high percentage of remedial course enrollments and a low percentage of enrollments to honors or gifted level coursework. The leaders saw these practices as both inequitable and also as contributing to the academic gaps for this population.

***Issues of access to school programming information.***

The lower enrollment of Black students into upper level coursework may also exist as a product of a knowledge gap around school programming information by Black students and families. Factors like lack of encouragement by teachers and counselors as described above by Dr. Jones demonstrated how staff within the system contributed to the knowledge gap for Black students to access upper level coursework. Dr. Jones explained how students, whose parents may have less school experience or whose work schedules make communication more challenging, could also possess a knowledge gap around the opportunities that exist for their students:

We see less engagement of parents either because we haven't figured out a good system to allow that engagement or sort of economic realities that if a parent is working 2nd and 3rd shift as I mentioned earlier it's kind of hard for them to go to a parent teacher conference. I think sometimes parents that are less educated are not as capable of advocating for their children so they don't know the system as well. (Jones, 2015 Interview)

He recognized that barriers created by schedules and with the school system itself contributed to knowledge gaps that hindered students in accessing certain educational opportunities.

In Tamarack, Dr. Greben described similar issues with the knowledge gap through his description of a parent communication session held at the high school around Advanced Placement coursework opportunities:

A lot of it was information. When you go through our underrepresented students especially they just don't know much about it and so the high school principal and the staff are very intentional. They had a parent meeting last spring before registration in our PA which seats 750 and it was packed. It was standing room only. Are you kidding? And so many came up after this meeting, "You know we didn't know anything about this. We know so little about this," and the same thing is true with kids. (Greben, 2015 Interview)

Both leaders recognized the issues within the system that they could shift to close knowledge gaps and neither cited the parents for not acting as stronger advocates. Their statements mirrored a culturally responsive approach to meet the families where they were and respond to their current level of knowledge and need (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Theoharis, 2009).

***Issues of access to extracurricular activities.***

The educational careers for many students may extend beyond the learning in the classroom to extracurricular activities like athletics, the performing arts, and academic clubs. A brief search of school websites in the suburbs surrounding major urban centers in the Midwestern state list a wide range of activities in which students can participate before or after their school day. Several studies have tied student participation in extracurricular activities, and in sports in particular, to gains in academic performance (Broh, 2002; Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Lipscomb, 2007;). The districts of Oak Park, Maple Leaf and Cherry Grove have district goals or vision statements tied to increasing student participation in extracurricular activities including.

We believe that student engagement is enhanced by offering a wide range of co-curricular activities (Oak Park Vision Statement, 2015).

Close the subgroup participation gap in Athletics and Activities. Increase athletic and activity participation overall (Maple Leaf Goal Statement, 2015).

Promote inclusion in groups, activities, athletics, and other cultural aspects of each School community (Cherry Grove Goal Statement, 2015).

Most of the district leaders within this study recognized that their Black students participated in extracurricular activities in the district at a lower rate than White peers. In particular leaders highlighted access to transportation as a major factor inhibiting students from participation as some students did not reside in the district and others come from families who worked in the evening hours. For Dr. Davis, most of the Black students did not reside in the district, but rather traveled to the district from the neighboring city. He described the complications this distance presented for students to participate in after school activities:

Most of these kids when they leave here, some of them are taking a bus that's 1.5 hours long to go home and those types of things. Maybe some of the afterschool types of things they don't always get involved in the non-athletic ones because there are transportation issues and things like that. (Davis , 2015 Interview)

Dr. Davis also described the participation gaps he observed in extracurricular activities and his desire to address it:

Like any district you look at the data about students in student government, you may have more white kids than black kids, you can look at different clubs and academic type clubs, there's not proportions. There's 30% minority but there's not 30% minority in the clubs so we are trying to really address that and really encourage students to get involved and find opportunities for them to be more involved. (Davis, 2015 Interview)

Like Dr. Davis, Dr. Harris and Dr. Greben also cited gaps in participation for Black students as well as issues involving transportation with many Black students also commuting from a distance.

Opportunity gaps are all over the place. AP and honors access, discrepancies between clubs, in sport access. How do I get home if I am a student who's coming to the district from the [integration program]. My coach schedules a 5 - 7pm practice, but the bus goes back to the city at 5:30. How do you want me to get home? So there are opportunity issues. (Harris, 2015 Interview)

Another job that we have is in participation so we are very intentional about reducing the number of barriers for kids to participate whether that's paying for their stuff or providing transportation (Greben, 2015 Interview).

These leaders recognized that access involving cost and transportation created barriers for participation of many of their Black students in extracurricular activities. Dr. Green of Maple Leaf and Dr. Jones of Oak Park also noted that the activity offerings did not always align to the needs and interests of certain populations of students, which may explain some of their access gaps in terms of extracurricular participation. Here they described the steps they had taken towards identifying the gaps and seeking solutions to close them.

The starting point is identifying it and then it's a matter of what core strategies can you deploy to hook in different kids to different areas of passion and to build the types of programming that they care about and asking them. You have to pull them in. You have to provide opportunities around the area that they are passionate about and we're also shifting it to the hot job market so that when we are looking at the types of opportunities that we provide we're leading them towards those family-supporting wages with their co-curricular activities (Green, 2015 Interview).

We try to have a wide range of options and develop new ones that resonate with students who are not participating so part of it is we want those kids to achieve academically yet we will still want them to be connected to the school so they feel like they belong that it is meaningful beyond just the academics. (Jones, 2015 Interview)

These leaders recognized the importance of student participation in extracurricular activities as a means to increase student engagement with the school community. Dr. Green and Dr. Jones expressed the need to create new activities that better aligned to the interests of their Black students. This fits a culturally responsive approach to addressing the participation gap by

presenting activities with greater alignment to the backgrounds and interests of the students (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

***Gaps in access to technology supports resulting from socioeconomic disparities.***

The final gap described by the leaders within the study involves access to technology that would support student learning within and beyond the classroom. Dr. Jones stated that the Black student population attending the Oak Park School District also made up a large portion of their students of low socioeconomic status. These students did not have the same access to computers, tablets, or Smart devices as their more affluent and White peers. He described how they uncovered and addressed the technology gaps observed among students in the district:

We did a survey and found that 80% of our students have somewhere between 3 and 20 devices in their household and they have internet available. 10% had a device that might not be reliable and it is shared by 3 to 5 people and is a little bit hard to determine how much access they have. Ten percent seem to have very low access so the bottom 20% which generally correlates with free and reduced lunch we offered a Chromebook at a very low cost that they would own. We also have Internet access through Wi-Fi devices they can check out so it's like one element of how we're trying to address the achievement gap with that technology access. (Jones, 2015 Interview)

Dr. Jones recognized that in an age of education where communication and course assignments largely come through digital means, a lack of access to technology may contribute to widening academic gaps for Black students.

The superintendents of this study demonstrated a commitment to advocating for equity for Black students by acknowledging existing gaps that contributed to and went beyond the

academic achievement gap (Howard, 2010; Irvine, 2010). They identified gaps in discipline, participation, knowledge of systems and in technology that all played a role in reduced opportunities and reduced positive educational outcomes for Black students compared to their White peers. The acknowledgement of barriers within the system and bias among staff that contributed to widening gaps for Black students placed the responsibility upon these leaders to take action to build systems that supported greater equity.

### **Part III: Perceived Underlying Causes of Gaps and Creating Educational Systems of Equity for All Learners**

Part III of this chapter explores what each leader perceives as the root cause of the gaps previously described. These perceived causes explore issues of branding by the educational system, failed school integration programming, the impact of poverty, cultural differences between students and staff and racial bias from a majority White educator population. Based upon the perceived root causes of the gaps in their school systems, each leader offered up action steps that they had taken to eliminate or reduce the impact of the causes. The actions take the form of direct student support, teacher professional development and system-wide changes.

#### **Perceived underlying Causes.**

The superintendents in the study recognized that in order for them to implement changes that would create environments of equity for Black students, they need to understand the underlying causes that create the inequities. The literature around implementing organizational change cites identification of underlying causes of issues and tension as a necessary piece to moving organizations forward (Hall & Hord, 2011; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). The leaders in this study cited causes that they viewed as creating and contributing to the identified gaps in the district including cultural differences, home environment, packaged curricular strategies,

poverty, race, school integration, and societal issues. Overall these leaders recognized that issues within the system contributed most to the gaps observed in their districts which supports a social justice perspective (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Theoharis, 2009).

***Lack of focus and strategic solutions created by packaged strategies.***

Any educator who has worked in an educational system for multiple decades might argue that the educational system has not changed during that time, but rather has taken old strategies and given them new names. During the decade of the 1990s the educational system tracked students into high, average and remedial courses. Today most educators would decry student tracking and yet the Response to Intervention System similarly tracks students into general education classes or into tiered support classes that provide more basic instruction to build skills. Tracking and RtI may not be synonymous in the true sense, but it provides an example of how the more things change in education, the more they stay the same.

Dr. Green, in the Maple Leaf District, reflected the above sentiment in her response to underlying causes and views the over reliance on packaged strategies as a cause for Black students not seeing the same level of success as White peers in schools. She described her frustration around the constant labeling and packaging of educational programs for students:

We talked about high priority strategies. We talked about college career readiness strategies. We talked about reading strategies, math strategies. The problem is we're relabeling and packaging and the strategies have the same underpinnings, but we label them by program and then we talk about culturally responsive strategies well quite frankly some of those are some of the same strategies and then we label it again by



program. That fundamentally is a deterrent to having the leanest conversations and the strongest, fast training. (Green, 2015 Interview)

She saw the continuous focus on packaged programs and the new labels for old techniques as a barrier to understanding what the student really needed to be successful. She believed that leaders needed to allow the classroom and school data to dictate the best strategy for student support no matter if the strategy involved old methodology, new methodology or old techniques repackaged. If it improved student outcomes then the name became irrelevant. The focus for her district and the teachers that work there was not to adopt a program to solve students' learning and behavior challenges, but rather to address these challenges much like a medical professional might. Teachers must review the "symptoms" observed, diagnose the issue and treat it with an individualized support plan. For Dr. Green the underlying causes involved how teachers and the district previously relied on packaged strategies and programs to address learning deficits.

### ***Missteps of the school integration program.***

Around half of the districts in the study had a Black student population that came primarily from a school integration program introduced in the 1976. The developers of chapter 220 intended that the program would promote greater racial integration in the suburban and urban school districts providing the means for students from the city to attend schools in the suburbs and students in the suburbs to go to school in the city (Borsuk, 2007). The program has come under attack with the current governing administration with a push to phase it out citing open enrollment as an alternative for these students. Critics point out that unlike the integration program, open enrollment options do not provide students from the city, mostly Black students, free transportation to the suburban schools and would eventually reduce the number of enrolled

Black students overall (Borsuk, 2007). The superintendents who enrolled the majority of their Black students through the integration program spoke highly of the program, but also cited more gaps resulting from students not living in the district.

The superintendents in the integration program highlighted the diversity created in their district as a result of the integration program. At the same time, they described how the program created challenges around student engagement in the school community. Dr. Harris, of Hickory Hills, described how the program created gaps in co-curricular participation and parental engagement:

Opportunity gaps all over the place, APs and honors access, discrepancies between buildings, club and sport access. How do I get home if I am a student who's coming to school from the integration program. My coach schedules a 5 to 7 practice but the bus goes back to the city at 5:30. How do you want me to get home? (Harris, 2015 Interview)

While the program provided transportation for students to and from the district from the neighboring city, the busing schedule did not allow for students to engage in after school activities, which created a participation gap. Additionally, Dr. Harris described how the program can lead to gaps in parental engagement:

Parent engagement continues to be a challenge. Our largest African American population is a result of the integration program and our parents that are attached to those different programs don't come to us for parent conferences. They don't come to the sporting events. They don't get engaged in the school environment and we have not found a

quality way to increase their engagement. It would be very different if they lived across the street from the school, so that's a challenge. (Harris, 2015 Interview)

Distance from the district and challenges in transportation resulting from the integration program caused gaps in both student and parent participation for Black families in Hickory Hills.

***Impact of poverty on students' ability to engage in the learning process.***

Dr. Davis and Dr. Jones described how the majority of their Black student population also lived in poverty. These leaders discussed how deficits in terms of low access to technology, transportation, and healthy food along with lack of parent experience with post-secondary education contributed to the gaps that existed for Black students in their districts. Dr. Davis explained his view on the impact on learning from hunger and other elements of poverty that his students experienced:

You know kids are going to learn things when it's relevant to them, when it has meaning to them, when they are interested in it, not necessarily when we say third graders should learn fractions or whatever. I think there's a lot of assumptions about that. Especially when we are dealing with kids of different socioeconomic status, different race and ethnicity. Their lives are so different. Their motivations are so different, and we talk about the motivation of grades but you know that doesn't motivate many kids who are impoverished or hungry or whatever else.

There is some research that came out of a local university in the last week about just how the brain develops differently if you're in poverty, because of obviously lack of nutrition, but even the stimulus you have in your environment and the, for lack of a better term, chaos you might have in your environment so I think I think

we just have to realize that. These kids are coming from such different, they are growing up in such different circumstances and that the learning is going to look quite differently and the motivation to learn is different so I think that contributes to it. (Davis, 2015 Interview)

Dr. Davis described how issues of poverty and a lack of understanding around those issues and on the part of his staff contributed to gaps in learning for this student population. He understood that if teachers did not adjust instruction and classroom practices to account for the variance in motivation and access to basic needs, the gaps in learning and access would not close.

Dr. Jones similarly recognized the impact that poverty had on students' ability to learn in the classroom. Like Dr. Davis, he stressed the importance of building an awareness for staff and for the community of how poverty and issues of access required different instructional practices and classroom supports to help students be successful. Here he described how he worked with the community to increase awareness of issues of poverty and to generate community support to address the issues:

I think it's the awareness of how we work with a community of students and adults that have significant disadvantages and how we sort of ameliorate that.

I view it as a larger, we're trying to take care of their social emotional health and wellbeing, and we do that in the school context, but we also try to extend it into the community so we're working with the county right now on mental health initiatives in which we support for our students and our families. Some of our most extremely difficult students that are disproportionately Black need that

desperately. We work with the outreach ministry, the food pantry to make sure that families have food. (Jones, 2015 Interview)

Dr. Davis and Dr. Jones not only acknowledged poverty as a contributing factor to gaps for Black students, but they also reflected a belief that poverty did not have to act as a barrier to success. They did not view issues of poverty as preventing access to a quality education and they alluded to ways in which leaders could reduce the deficits created through awareness of learning differences and student motivation along with increased access to nutrition and services. This heightened awareness also arose as a need in terms of understanding cultural differences.

### ***Cultural differences between educators and students.***

The second most cited cause of gaps between Black and White students in the districts studied involved cultural differences between the instructional staff and the students. All eight leaders noted that the majority of teachers and principals in the districts came from White, middle class and suburban backgrounds, which contrasted with their Black student populations, most of which came from low socioeconomic households in urban areas. The research on culturally responsive practices cites how the differences in cultural norms can lead to conflicts in the classroom as well as gaps in learning when lessons do not connect to the lived experiences of the students (Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley, Irvine, Nieto, Shofield & Steven, 2001; Carter, 2005; Taylor, 2010; White-Clark, 2005). The superintendents drew similar conclusions when reflecting on themselves or their own staff.

Dr. Davis, in the Birchwood District, reflected on differences that many of his students faced growing up Black and poor, as well as the difficulties they face attending a school taught by a majority White teaching population:

I grew up in a different, certainly not a class background at all, but I'm not an African American kid. So I think we kind of try to work with our staff a lot to see that. Some of them have a difficult time acknowledging that. We have these biases, we have these schema that's different than theirs. And we have to also understand that students, African American kids are in a situation where there are all White teachers, all White middle class teachers, who don't know what it's like. (Davis, 2015 Interview)

In a similar fashion, Dr. Dunn, in the Cherry Grove District, described the impact on learning for Black students in his district due to a majority White teaching population who also grew up in majority White and middle class neighborhoods. He cited the importance of his staff being reflective and taking pause when responding to Black students in the classroom:

I think it's very important for teachers and principals especially at the building level and a superintendent level to understand that as we are truly looking at these cases that we use that lens of you really need to double check yourself especially if we have grown up in primarily White environments. We haven't been in urban environments necessarily or environments where we have African American students or students from other racial groups. What is our initial reaction and how much of that may be your own personal anxiety that plays out in a reaction to students. (Davis, 2015)

Dr. Harris, in the Hickory Hills Disrrict, echoed the sentiments expressed by Dr. Davis and Dr. Dunn as he acknowledged the lack of experience his majority White staff had in working with Black students:

As is often the case I think teachers are a challenge, stereotypes they bring, training lack thereof, experiences lack thereof (Harris, 2015 Interview).

The leaders of Birchwood, Cherry Grove and Hickory Hills each stressed the need for teachers and principals to develop an awareness of how their own lived experiences differed from their Black students especially if they grew up White and middle class in suburban environments. They needed to recognize that the students came with different perspectives on learning, expectations and motivations.

Dr. Dunn extended the discussion around cultural differences to express the need for staff members to not only have awareness of their different experiences, but to also develop a sense of empathy for the experiences of many Black families and to validate those experiences. In this passage he again discussed the need for his teachers to reflect on their reactions around their responses to Black students in the classroom and to acknowledge the feelings of those students and the rationale behind their actions:

I think that just getting people to not be over reactive to those situations and just acting out of emotion but to be more reflective and understanding of that you are going to feel anxious, you're going to feel confused, you're not going to understand what's going on but you have to trust that at some level what this is mother and father and children are experiencing is for them real and it doesn't make sense to me the looks and comments that doesn't make sense to me. I don't see those because that doesn't happen to me when I'm working in the mall or driving down the street but it is real for them. (Davis, 2015 Interview)

When teachers and principals have different lived experiences than their students, they may deny the experiences of their students or question the reality of them, because the White staff themselves have never had those experiences. In a similar vein Ladson- Billings (1998)

described how the prevalence of White culture in education has led to the elimination of the Black historical perspective and disempowerment. Dr. Dunn believed that in order to strengthen the relationships between White staff and Black students and for White staff to serve as effective educators of Black students, they needed to allow those students to speak their truth and to validate their experiences. The differences in lived experiences between Black students and White staff however, did not arise solely from differences in cultural norms, but also stemmed from issues around race.

***Racial bias and prejudice as the primary cause of educational inequities.***

The most cited cause of gaps in education for Black students by the superintendents of this study involved race. Racial bias, racism and prejudices existing in past and present society played a role in the creation and maintenance of gaps for Black students. The leaders of Cherry Grove and Oak Park spoke to the historical impact of race on the present day challenges. Dr. Dunn described the long history of inequities that Black people have faced from the arrival to the Americas through present day and the challenges faced by current society to undo those hundreds of years:

It probably starts back in the 1780s with slavery for example. I think there's a true grounding in our fundamental societal flaws. In our 200 years of segregation. When I think about that is the context of the length of time and think about the fact that the civil rights movement and the Voting Rights Act are just in the 1960s so you take the time from 1776 to 1960 and then to assume that from 1960 to 2015 that we can have this solved I think put that in perspective of the amount of time that it took to develop these



inequities and then the amount of time that it's going to take to really have us unwind that. (Dunn, 2015 Interview)

Dr. Jones reflected on how racism towards Black people occurred not only on a societal level, but also how it became ingrained in public policy and practice:

I think there has been societal and institutional racism that plays the part and there are significant elements of poverty that African Americans have been subject to that many other races haven't. I think there are federal policies and state policies that are specifically discriminatory, an example being housing subsidies that were provided to World War II veterans if you were White but not Blacks that went on for two or three decades. (Jones, 2015 Interview)

The leaders acknowledged how historical issues of race beginning with slavery and evolving into discriminatory policies around housing, financial supports and overall inequitable treatment set Black families up for failure in American Society. Dr. Jones and Ms. Wilson of Pinedale described how current policies perpetuated these practices which placed Black communities at a disadvantage compared to White communities. Dr. Jones detailed how inequities in policy and legal actions have divided Black families to the detriment of that population:

Here I think that there is an implicit level of racism that is different than in the explicit Ku Klux Klan, water cannons, German Shepherds, George Wallace kind of racism. It's really a lot more difficult to get at I think if there also has been a struggle in the Black community to sort of hold families together. I think that there have been policies regarding drug enforcement and prison sentences that have been unequal and unfair. A White person arrested for cocaine versus a Black person for crack. That if we take 30%

of our Black males from age 18 to 25 and we throw them in prison for 5 - 35 years, but we don't do that to our White better educated quote and better economically affluent that has an impact on the community. (Jones, 2015 Interview)

Ms. Wilson decried the bleak outlook for Black students in the state and the failure of the state's leaders to acknowledge racism and inequitable policies as a contributing factor:

I'm sure you're research is leading you to what that means to be Black in this state and it's one of the worst places to be and you look at housing access you look at jobs, all the pieces that affect access for families. It's very interesting. We also participated in the school integration program and now that has been closed and again legislators will say to you "Oh it's met its goal" and I'll say "Really? We still have the largest achievement gap in the nation for African Americans. Like what goal did you attend to here?" So when you look at the "why's" one of the hardest things probably to have the conversation about is what it means to be Black because a lot of times people want to make it about poverty you know and there certainly can be a gap there too and you should be paying attention to that, but we have to be able to have conversations around race and that's really uncomfortable. (Wilson, 2015 Interview)

The superintendents' recognition of the inequalities created by systemic racial disparities aligns to Critical Race Theory, which critiques institutions like schools which have perpetuated stereotypes, racism, and White supremacy (Decuir & Dixon, 2004, Ladson-Billings, 1998). In keeping with this theoretical framework, the leaders of Birchwood, Cherry Grove and Oak Park noted that in order to eliminate these inequities, our society as a whole must recognize the existing racism perpetuated by current systems. Dr. Davis reiterated the need not only for his

staff, but also for society to dig more deeply into reflection around our own biases and the impact it had on education for Black students:

I think that now you are seeing a lot more that race is a factor, that it's not just socioeconomic but that it also is race. That's not meant to be racist or derogatory, but the reality of it is, for whatever reason, for many reasons I guess, that they are starting to research that Black...African American males are the lowest achieving subgroup there is, and when you really examine that you know, why is that? Are there things we do? Are there biases that we have that contribute to that and I think that's the main thing, just being able to really examine that and really understand that we have these biases, that we have biases and I can't really know what it's like to be a poor African American kid.

(Davis, 2015 Interview)

Dr. Dunn equated the ability to succeed as an educational leader to engaging in ongoing reflection around the impact of race on one's own lived experiences and the lived experiences of others:

To really understand the dynamic of race and their experiences being different from what my experiences were as a White student growing up in a White community, you know for me to be really a leader and an advocate for them was very difficult without really listening and understanding what their experiences are. Even though I can acknowledge it I haven't lived it. (Dunn, 2015 Interview)

Like Dr. Davis and Dr. Dunn, Dr. Jones explained the need for White society to recognize the impact that race can have on a person's ability to succeed or fail:

I don't know that our White middle-class population is aware of the implicit disadvantages and biases that exist in the community. As a White community, a Black president, everybody is part of the same economic system. It's all fair. There's no problems, you know, if somebody got thrown in jail it's their fault and you know you need to sort of pull up your bootstraps and take yourself so I think that we have to battle maybe a simplistic view of a society and I'm not arguing against sort of self-reliance or sort of the individualism and destiny of hard work because I do believe in that, but it's not that simple. (Jones, 2015 Interview)

The research around Culturally Responsive Practices cites recognition of race, racial bias and racism in systems through self-reflection as a critical first step in helping educators become more effective instructors of Black students (Barnes, 2006; Howard, 2003). The superintendents of Cherry Grove, Oak Park, Birchwood and Pinedale illustrated their desire to take that step for themselves and with their staff as they acknowledged the issues of race that existed within their districts. This step allowed them to begin the transformation process within their system to build more equitable learning environments and close gaps for Black students.

### **The journey towards creating educational systems of equity for all learners.**

Each of the superintendents in this study took action within their district to create environments of equity for Black students and for all students. The leaders of Birchwood, Hickory Hills, Maple Dale, Oak Park and Tamarack each have multiple years invested in their districts around taking action to increase equity. The leaders of Cherry Grove and Pinedale, as first year superintendents, have just begun the process in their respective districts. Dr. Thomas of Spruceland, now a former superintendent of Spruceland, addressed past attempts to create change to address issues of inequity. All of the leaders, no matter the number of years in the

position, displayed a desire to make a difference in the lives of Black students. The actions they took came in the forms of supports specifically aimed at student engagement and learning, supports to develop teachers as more effective instructors of Black students, and supports to change the educational system to create an equitable learning environment for Black students.

***Meeting the basic needs of Black students in poverty.***

While being Black a student is not synonymous with being a poor student, most of the superintendents in the study stated that their population of Black students also made up their population of students in poverty. Dr. Jones of Oak Park believed that in order to close some of the academic gaps for his Black students, the district must minimize the impact that poverty had on students' ability to learn. Here he described multiple ways in which his district offered supports to Black families of low socioeconomic status to address gaps in their basic needs:

We're trying to take care of their [Black students] social emotional health and wellbeing and we do that in the school context, but we also try to extend it into the community so we're working with [the] County right now on mental health initiatives in which we support our students and our families. Some of our most extremely difficult students that are disproportionately Black need that desperately. We work with the [local] outreach ministry, the food pantry to make sure that families have food and if they can't afford it at home (...) [The] youth outreach ministry also provides a thousand backpacks each year to students in need so they come to school with the things they need so there is that community engagement. Our police department works with us. They have changed at the City Council some of the penalties for small amounts of possession of drugs that used to

put parents in jail. They have changed their approach to citations and enforcing fines for people who can't afford it so we work with them on that. (Jones, Interview 2015)

Dr. Jones engaged a variety of resources to create equity through the assurance that the Black students in poverty in the district had their basic needs met the way that their more affluent peers already did. He also recognized that the meeting of basic needs alone would not level the educational playing field in the 21st century. As a result he took measures to address technology gaps created by poverty.

So we're actually trying to develop an after school program not just for co-curriculars, but also for academic support that would sort of replicate what our middle-class and upper class students receive, including access to the technology. One of the programs that we have is a Technology for All program(...) We offered a Chromebook at a very low cost (...) If they can't afford the [cost] we waive that. (...) We also have Internet access through Wi-Fi devices they can check out so it's like one element of how we're trying to address the achievement gap with that technology access. (Jones, Interview 2015)

The steps taken by Dr. Jones reflected some of the short term supports superintendents can implement to directly impact student learning. The leaders also recognized the need for more long-term supports to close gaps for Black students.

### ***Providing early access to education for Black families.***

The leaders of Birchwood and Hickory Hills each stressed the importance of early access to education for Black students in their districts as a contributing factor to their success moving through the school system. Dr. Harris reached out to families new to the district and with new

babies to ensure early connections to education with special emphasis on literacy skills. He described the early literacy program that his district offers in this passage:

We have spent significant time as an organization trying to build out a birth to five literacy approach. Not as a five year old you're now in kindergarten so I'm going to start helping your family learn about reading. We literally are birth to five so we work with our census and population centers to find out who has had babies and we send them a book from the school district just to begin to introduce the idea of reading at home and we have a reader program that we track all new families that move into the district. Then all existing families through our census data, we asked them to join us for the reading program where our reading specialist teaches you as a new parent how to make literacy come live in your home. (Harris, Interview 2015)

In Hickory Hills they took a proactive approach to address academic gaps for students through early outreach. In Birchwood, Dr. Davis similarly stressed the need to engage families and students with the district early on. Here he described how the data demonstrated that the longer a family remained with the district, the more positive the outcomes:

As a result of the integration program, which is probably 90% African American, they come in at 4k so we have them for 8 years to help them to work with them. They are not coming in and out and in some districts, urban districts, you may see a more transient population. A kid might go to 3 or 4 different schools and ours are going here in k4 and usually graduating 8th grade. (Davis, Interview 2015)

Not only did early access have an impact, but he also believed that the low class sizes in the district provided greater access to all supports than these students might otherwise have had if they attended the urban schools where they reside.

Understand that a 4k in this district is 15 kids with an aid as opposed to 30 in the urban public schools with no aid probably. We know that because we were interviewing 4k teachers this year. So that has been successful getting kids early on where they are students of ours and they still take the bus and go home so that's still an issue, but I think they become a little more assimilated into the culture than if they were just coming in at 7th grade or 8th grade. (Davis, Interview 2015)

Dr. Davis believed that the stronger connection with the school culture, born out of early enrollment into the district, along with more attention from adults resulting from lower class sizes helped to set students up for success. When early enrollment or early outreach was not an option however, leaders in the study have found other means to set students up for success in the classroom when they arrive.

### ***Creating and maintaining an environment of high expectations.***

Teacher evaluation tools used within the state based on the Stronge model (2012) and the Danielson Framework (2013) support that quality teachers set and communicate high expectations of learning for all students. The research on Culturally Responsive Practices echoed similar practices (Bondy, Ross, Galligane & Hambacher, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The superintendents reinforced the need for teachers to hold the same high expectations for Black students that they held for White students in order to close their academic gaps and to



create more inclusive learning environments. Dr. Davis stressed the importance of strong hiring practices to assure quality teachers for Black students.

I really look at my job as to just improve the quality of life of students, that really is the way feel and the way you do that is to have high expectations for students. You care about them, you know, and we hire teachers here who have high expectations for kids.  
(Davis, Interview 2015)

Dr. Harris discussed his approach to training current staff to work with all learners:

We've sent teams to [training] to just really equip people to think differently about students who are in disaggregate groups as opposed to labeling them. How are we equipping all kids to be successful? (Harris, Interview 2015)

Not only were these leaders concerned about the expectations communicated to students by teachers, but also how the type of coursework that Black students accessed communicated low or high expectations for their learning. Dr. Harris described how he shut down a remedial algebra course whose population consisted primarily of Black students.

And then we created a little buzz by abandoning bad practice in real time. So we had algebra 1a, let's teach it louder and slower and see if they get it. Four years ago we inherited that system and guess who was in that class? All of our Black kids. We said "no." The place I thought was going to explode. The high schools were ready to kill us, but both of our high school principals said, knowing what we know now, we cannot allow that practice to continue so those students were rescheduled. They didn't have a year-long algebra 1 class anymore. They had a semester of algebra 1 and it was regular algebra 1 and if we needed to push resources and help the students be successful in there

we were going to do that as opposed to segregating them out, self-contain them. Self-contaminated. We weren't going to do that anymore so we made some courageous steps. (Harris, Interview 2015)

In the above passage, Dr. Harris demonstrated how leaders can fight against existing systems to assure that all students have equal access to high quality content and expectations to learn in lieu of remedial tracks. Similarly, Dr. Jones voiced his concerns around the impact of how high versus low expectations directed from teachers to students resulted in participation gaps by Black students in higher level coursework.

How do we engage students to be more conscious and active in advocating for themselves and part of it is talking to our high school staff and our middle school and elementary staff in setting higher expectations for minorities and part of that is measured by are we encouraging and ensuring that we have strong representation of minority groups in our honors and AP curriculum. The high school offers 156 university credits so are we ensuring that the Black and Latino students are enrolling and being successful or do we sort of unknowingly or unthinkingly discourage them from taking those classes (...) so we try to look at those things. (Jones, Interview 2015)

By shifting the expectations that teachers and staff had of their Black students, the leaders in Birchwood, Hickory Hills, and Oak Park shifted the educational access for students to challenging tracks with high expectations that could increase opportunities moving forward. While expectations set the stage for learning, the leaders also recognize that personal connections with students play a key role in closing gaps.

***Creating and strengthening caring teacher and student relationships.***

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines relationship as “the way in which two or more people or things are connected” or “the way in which two or more people, groups, countries, etc., talk to, behave toward, and deal with each other” (Relationship, n.d.). The research conducted on Culturally Responsive teachers described how they sought to build caring relationships with their students and took time to learn their students’ interests (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane & Hambacher, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The superintendents spoke about establishing relationships between the teachers and students as a key support for closing learning gaps for students as well as for supporting their emotional well-being to be able to learn. Dr. Davis in the Birchwood District reiterated, multiple times in his interview, the importance of hiring the right educators to place in classrooms with a diverse group of students.

I think it is to make sure you are hiring the right people who really care about all kids and believe that all kids can learn and that takes different techniques and different approaches, but they really believe all kids can learn and they understand that they might have some biases and things that get in the way unless they address them and acknowledge about being effective with different minority groups or socio economic students, so I think that's really it, hiring good people who bring a disposition of really caring about all kids and wanting to help all kids.

We look to hire people who are, really bring a disposition of understanding.  
Some of that culturally responsive teaching (Davis, Interview 2015).

I think just getting the right people on the bus and hiring the right staff who are going to be in front of these kids you know, that's my job, get these people who

care about kids, get these people who understand students of color and bring in a disposition where it's their job to help all kids to be successful and to care about kids and if they don't then do something else you know. There's just too much at stake for you to not, to just want to teach White kids or just not want to change your beliefs or your approaches. (Davis, Interview 2015)

Dr. Davis emphasized the need for his teachers to have the desire to connect with and teach all students and not just the ones who shared cultural similarities. These teachers also needed to possess the ability to recognize their biases and how those biases could interfere with learning. Research on culturally responsive teachers further reinforces that the establishment of a positive relationship between the teacher and the students supports the teacher in his or her ability to engage students in the learning process (Bondy, Ross, Galligane & Hambacher, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

***Building student engagement in the classroom and school community.***

Charlotte Danielson (2013), a leading researcher on teacher effectiveness, described engagement as the following:

When students are engaged in learning, they are not merely 'busy,' nor are they only 'on task.' Rather, they are intellectually active in learning important and challenging content. The critical distinction between a classroom in which students are compliant and busy, and one in which they are engaged, is that in the latter students are developing their understanding through what they do. (p. 69)

Student learning occurs when teachers create environments that support student engagement with the lesson. Dr. Green of Maple Leaf engaged students in the learning process by systematically

gathering their feedback around how they learned best. Here she described how the district gathered and utilized feedback to improve engagement in the learning process:

You're really talking about a deep sense of deep commitment to really figuring out what makes the biggest difference for which kids and then applying it over and over again.

The ability to take the student feedback into the process around an improvement cycle and to use their direct feedback in planning for their instruction moving forward.

Teachers will ask the students for feedback every 10 to 15 days and what strategies made the biggest difference for them and the teachers will actually redeploy those strategies in their next unit of instruction. (Green, Interview 2015)

Dr. Green stressed the importance of students having a voice in the learning process and well as having a strong understanding of how they learned and what worked best for them.

So obviously the goal is to get the kids reflective on what strategies work for them with what their targets are. How many times do we write IEPs and have kids that don't know what their targets are? So when we talk about making the system of learning work, it's including the students in the process, including the kids in the goal setting, the data monitoring, understanding which strategies leverage their abilities to the highest extent and then teaching them the specific language around those core strategies so that they can be explicit on what works for them. (Green, Interview 2015)

Dr. Green's approach to creating student engagement in the learning process demonstrated how a district could close knowledge gaps for Black students by helping them understand how they learned and empowering them to advocate for the strategies that worked best for them. The use of student feedback and the development of an understanding of how students learn best aligns to

Ladson-Billings' (1995a) central tenets of CRP in which she states that "Students must experience academic success" (p.160). Dr. Green worked to develop systems to assure that students could have success and that they understood how to achieve it.

In the districts of Oak Park and Pinedale, engagement of students involved developing learning opportunities based on students' interests and backgrounds. Dr. Jones described how he solicited student input through annual surveys in order to inform ways to improve the climate of the schools:

We actually do some engagement with student surveys to find out how comfortable students are in our high school and in our middle school and so that survey data can help us track whether students feel accepted, safe, socially isolated or not and if there are differences between Whites and Blacks, Blacks and Latinos and we try to sort that out. (Jones, Interview 2015)

These data also allowed the district to examine new ways to engage students through curricular and extra-curricular offerings.

We try to have a wide range of options and develop new ones that resonate with students who are not participating. So part of it is we want those kids to achieve academically and we will still want them to be connected to the school so they feel like they belong that it is meaningful beyond just the academics. (Jones, Interview 2015)

In a similar manner, Ms. Wilson of Pinedale sought out student feedback to understand how the district could create more engaging learning opportunities.

We have really made strides to empower our students, to solicit their opinions about their learning, to give them opportunities to create things. I've had kids email me you know around stuff like “hey I was thinking about this” and say how can I help you make it happen you know. So our kids were sitting on the bleachers watching the basketball team and we have this flexible instruction time and so I was like well “what do you want to do during that? You can plan that. What do you want to do during that time?”(...) And our size affords us those relationships where we are in the classroom we know and how do you get to yes when they have ideas? How do you help shape that? How do you help empower them to do things? (Wilson, Interview 2015)

Dr. Green, Dr. Jones and Ms. Wilson all placed a high emphasis on soliciting student feedback to inform current practices in teaching, increase student engagement with the learning process and improve the climate of the learning environment. They used students’ interests as a means to empower them in the learning process and demonstrated how the district valued their input.

Taking student feedback a step further, the leaders of Birchwood, Cherry Grove and Oak Park created Black student forums or groups specific to soliciting those student voices as a way to increase their engagement with the district and to gather their feedback to improve the learning environment. Dr. Davis, in the Birchwood District, talked about the district’s involvement with a conference in support of Black, male students.

We sent a group of African American males to a Black Males summit this year and this was at the middle school that we did this and it really gave students a voice in terms of really talking about their experience (Davis, Interview 2015).

Dr. Dunn, in the Cherry Grove District, explained how the district partnered with local institutions of higher education to provide opportunities for Black students to have their voices heard.

We had student groups, our African American student groups, that we got together and we partnered with technical colleges and the university system to help facilitate essentially conversations about race and what our students were experiencing as African American kids in a white school. What were your experiences? What would you say to principals? Would you say to teachers to help you feel more engaged or feel more valued? (Dunn, Interview 2015)

Similarly, Dr. Jones, in the Oak Park District, sought out partnerships to ensure that his Black students had equity of voice in his district. Here he described some of those partnerships and the impact they have on student engagement and expression.

We would also try to engage students with organizations like the Students' Voice Union, we are a member of the Minority Student Action Network (Jones, Interview 2015).

[Many of our Black students attended] the National Conference of Minority Student Achievement Network and the theme of that was exploring deeper roots and it was about empowerment engagement and expectations of excellence(...) One of the things they did, the foundation of their conversation was to build an action plan to take back to their school district, was this root cause analysis and so it was asking them exactly the same questions you just ask me and they literally had a graphic of a tree so you had two branches up there and that's kind of what you see that's how it manifests itself in very different ways and then you get to the trunk and under the ribs where you get to what are



the underlying causes that lead to inequities and you hear the kids come up with those thoughts. So it would be lack of access to information, lack of encouragement. (Jones, Interview 2015)

These forums, student groups, and summits assured opportunities for Black students to have a voice and to share their experiences growing up Black in a mostly White educational system. The groups supported the superintendents' ability to build a connection with the students as a way to close the participation gap. The leaders' desire to solicit Black student input on learning and the school environment demonstrated a culturally responsive understanding of the importance of utilizing students' interests and backgrounds as the foundation for building out opportunities (Gay, 2002; Morrison, et. al., 2008). These superintendents not only worked to expand engagement through student feedback, but also through parent feedback.

Several leaders expressed both the challenges and the desire to improve connections with Black families in the district. Ms. Wilson and Dr. Thomas both recognized that educational systems may ignore or marginalize the voices of Black families. They described how leaders needed to step up and confront this practice. Ms. Wilson described a situation in one of her schools in which a principal disregarded the voices of parents by not engaging them in a meeting around their child's learning needs:

Having a problem solving meeting around a child and you [the principal] didn't invite the parents, you know, and having to work with principals saying "we are going to talk about some things that are going to be hard for them [the parents] to hear" and I say "well why are you having a meeting about a child?" I'd be really mad if I were the parent and knowing that you [the principal] and 6 people are at a table talking about your kids and

what are you saying at the table that you can't say in front of a parent, you know, that's just analyzing all of those pieces. (Wilson, Interview 2015)

Dr. Thomas described how the overreliance on student data has led schools to overlook the importance of building relationships with parents:

The more we as educators get to know our students and families and really make it a partnership between school and home the more successful they will be and that is a missing piece, you know, right now we're talking all of data, data, data and we are trying to de-personalize it and that is a huge problem. (Thomas, Interview, 2015)

In order to engage some Black families in their District, these superintendents recognized that they must confront practices that purposely left families out of the conversation and they needed to personalize the experiences of families.

Dr. Davis and Dr. Dunn took steps to personalize engagement for Black families by organizing groups and meetings specifically for them to build relationships and solicit their input on the education of their children. Dr. Davis described some of the parent nights the middle school hosted to build relationships with Black families and increase engagement:

They have done some neat things at the middle school, some evenings with parents that were strictly aimed at race and talking about race in our school, not burying our head in the sand but talking about the experience of an African American. (...) What is it like to be the parent of a kid who goes on the bus forever to [the district] and so on. (Davis, Interview 2015)

Prior to Dr. Dunn's arrival as superintendent, the district of Cherry Grove had created a parent support group specifically for Black families. He described his desire to expand upon the work that has been done with the group to increase dialogue and parent engagement:

One of the things that can be expanded on is deliberate outreach to our African American families. [We have] essentially an African American family, I don't know if you want to call it, support group and if it's actually supposed to be like that, but it's an opportunity for African American families to get together to talk and to engage in conversations of resources, about experiences and that's been started by both of our elementary schools to be able to begin that dialogue. So I think that outreach piece needs to happen and a program like that needs to be expanded because I think that just shows from a school standpoint that we understand that there are extra barriers for African American families and that we want to listen. (Dunn, Interview 2015)

These leaders created a space for Black families to have a voice in the education of their students where they may otherwise have been marginalized by the voices of a majority White parent population. They created personalized opportunities for parents to engage with the system that would also foster relationships with the school community. Their actions supported the closure of a participation gap for Black families. The increased engagement of parents through these outreach activities also served to address gaps in knowledge around the educational system.

Leaders from Oak Park, Spruceland and Tamarack described ways that they closed knowledge gaps for parents who lacked familiarity with educational opportunities like high level coursework and postsecondary enrollment. Dr. Jones in the Oak Park District explained how his

district changed their conferencing practices to target students with greater need and to help parents understand the various educational opportunities for students:

We have targeted individual one-on-one conferences that are going to be reserved for our students who are not performing well and if they don't sign up that we call so part of that process would also be looking at the sort of academic balance of those students and encouraging them and counselling them into higher level courses and asking them what is your career plan? What courses are you planning to take at a higher level because if your strength is in the sciences here are the options. You want to consider for the Humanities here are the options you should consider and if you take these credits and order them at the high school level they're going to be somewhere between free and \$40 per credit if you try to take them at the university level you're going to pay at least \$250 to \$500 per credit plus all of the living expenses (...) So if we can get our minority students a head start what a huge thing and the amount of money that would save them from the university system. (Jones, Interview 2015)

Dr. Thomas, in the Spruceland District, also worked to close knowledge gaps for families by also recognizing the difficulty many families had in their ability to attend school events due to work schedule conflicts, challenges with transportation or a lack of trust and relationship with the school system. He described his efforts to bring information directly to families rather than relying on their ability to come to the schools:

I started with a few people who we can have a discussion about. Apartment meetings and going to them [parents] and presenting information and you know we put out some information, put up some tables, have some food, pass out materials, have some books

giveaways and prizes and just try to connect with the families that we didn't always see coming to the schools. So we will come to you and then you come to us under the ideology that you have to do a little bit extra for the families who need more and so they're going to be a little bit more reluctant to come to the school events and they may need a separate conversation too. (Thomas, Interview 2015)

Dr. Greben discussed how his high school administration recognized that a primary reason for low engagement of students of color in advanced level coursework resulted from a lack of information. Here he described how the high school staff reached out to these families:

A lot of it was information when you go through our underrepresented students especially they just don't know much about it [advanced placement courses] and so the high school principal and the staff are very intentional. They had a parent meeting last spring before registration in our PA which seats 750 and it was packed. It was standing room only, are you kidding, and so many [parents] came up after this meeting “you know we didn't know anything about this. We know so little about this” and the same thing is true with kids, just getting that information about that out there so that has probably been the biggest mover for us. (Greben, Interview 2015)

By closing knowledge gaps for parents around how to navigate the educational system, these leaders demonstrated how they increased access to opportunities that students may not have had before. Through the implementation of student supports that addressed meeting their basic needs, setting high expectations, building relationships, and fostering engagement the superintendents began the process of creating more equitable environments for Black students in the schools. They implemented supports for which they recognized the majority of White

students in the district already had access. In order to sustain these student supports, however, they also needed to assure support from staff.

***Improving teacher capacity to effectively support the learning of Black students.***

The superintendents in this study recognized that in order to sustain the student supports they identified to build environments of equity for Black students, they needed to assure staff had the necessary training to do so. As the research from Darling-Hammond (2010) states, these leaders recognized that teachers make the greatest impact on student growth. They stressed the importance of hiring well, building capacity, providing culturally responsive training, developing problem solving skills and engaging them in continuous reflection around practice.

***Hiring for and instilling a growth mindset in all educators.***

These superintendents sought new teachers with the correct disposition to teach all students and to work with students of varying cultural backgrounds and abilities. Leaders of Cherry Grove, Hickory Hills, Maple Leaf, Pinedale and Tamarack all described how they sought teachers and principals who viewed themselves as learners and who expressed a desire to grow. They looked for dispositions that supported a growth mindset. Dr. Dunn, in the Cherry Grove District, stressed the importance of a growth mindset in terms of educators' ability to support student learning:

I would say that overall is really using that growth mindset of growth and development which carries through from our students onto our staff along with us as administrators myself and what are my areas of growth to be able to push forward. Nobody has ever arrived and I think that's a dangerous place to be from a system standpoint and

individually and professionally to be able to, you have to fight that. (Dunn, Interview 2015)

Dr. Harris, in the Hickory Hills District, expressed the need for staff to possess a growth mindset in order to persevere in their ability to do all they could to support student learning:

[Staff possess] willingness to take risks and try everything in the name of kids. Then finish with the ability to withstand criticism (Harris, Interview 2015).

Recognizing that students and learning needs are constantly changing, Dr. Green emphasized the need of educators to also constantly adapt and evolve their practices in order to be effective supporters of student growth:

I think teachers come out thinking that they are certified in an area and the need base of children has changed over decades and the ability to view themselves as able to continue to learn, adapt to the changing needs of the students, able to reflect, able to work well with colleagues, able to be proud of your practice, but not arrogant, and be proud of your profession without getting sucked into the politics and continuing to learn because fundamentally what I know now wasn't even part of, wasn't even on my radar when I started and taking charge of your own profession because you can't wait for the organization to meet all of your learning needs. You have to tackle those too. (Green, Interview 2015)

Ms. Wilson in the Pinedale District noted that her organization provided a wealth of training and knowledge to employees, but they had to possess the willingness to learn, change and to give back:

Building relationships with kids. That you are a collaborative. That you are a learner.

That you are reflective and that you are going to contribute and only you can be a brand new person and we're committed to developing you as an organization, but what are you going to contribute to us? What do you have because everyone can learn something from anyone. (Wilson, Interview 2015)

Like the leaders above, Dr. Greben described the Tamarack district's practice of hiring staff who were willing to learn and adapt:

We have other things that we put in place to make sure that the kind of people that we hired are people of the disposition of a growth mindset for all of the students (Greben Interview 2015).

Similar to the teacher dispositions described in the research on Culturally Responsive Practices, these leaders sought teachers and staff who adapted to changing educational climates and changing student populations (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane & Hambacher, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995). They sought teachers willing to reflect on their practice, make changes that benefit the students and address academic gaps.

Dr. Greben further stressed not only the need for a growth mindset, but also an equity mindset in new hires. He emphasized that teachers and leaders must possess a desire to create systems of equity and to support all students when hired.

Hiring really, really, really, committed believers for administrators and then taking what you have and converting them if they are not converted (...) and that is a mindset that I look for and if you don't have it or if you don't want to development then don't bother.

We are so intentional about that right now. (...) We just put it right up there in front and



[say] this is what our work is about. Our work is about achievement and success for every single kid so if you are not into that then don't bother. (Geben, Interview 2015)

Dr. Geben believed that the desire to create systems of equity came from within or from a person's general disposition. He expressed his frustration with staff who did not possess the passion or desire to do the work needed to create equity:

I believe that this kind of work, that this equity work, that if you don't have it in your heart there is no amount of professional development that is going to move you and it has to be in here (points at heart) so that's why I get frustrated with some of our staff who are just looking for technical solutions or just tell me what to do. No, it has to be about how you feel and then you will be open to learn more about what to do because you can't just layer another technical solution on this because that is fake and the kids see right through that so and moving a person's heart is a lot harder than moving a person's practice which is hard enough so that's the challenge again. (Geben, Interview 2015)

Dr. Geben viewed the ability to be an effective educator of students from the most difficult situations as something that came from deep within the teacher. These teachers must have a passion to work with and growth all students and must see the potential in all students no matter their circumstances.

We just want to jump to the technical solutions tell me what to do and I'll do it with fidelity and then everything will be better right? But that doesn't do anything about your bias. It doesn't do anything about mindset and so you can perform a technical skill, but if you have a Black kid come into your class that is new, that has had 3 different school changes in the last year and has not been successful, for you to think about the assets

piece as opposed to the deficit piece that has got to come from here (points at heart).

(Greiben, Interview 2015)

The emphasis on the need for teachers and leaders to possess the passion and the heart to want to create equity for Black students reflected the desire of Dr. Greben to assure that students had access to high quality staff and a positive learning environment. In hiring, he sought out change makers who would support the work that he led out to close gaps for Black students. The superintendents of this study assured that their hiring process intentionally identified staff with a growth mindset and a passion to support equitable instruction. The leaders also recognized the need to develop their current staff and build their capacity to address the needs of all students.

*Building adult capacity to work with all students.*

The superintendents in this study discussed at length the importance of hiring teachers and principals with a passion and the knowledge to support the growth of a diverse student population. They also recognized that those staff members currently in the organization may require support to build their capacity to work effectively with all students. They cited the need to provide training to staff to support continuous growth that will address student needs. Dr. Green in the Maple Leaf District saw her role and the role of her principals as leading the charge to support all teachers in their ability to diagnose and support the learning needs of all students:

The role of leadership in any district is to actually develop the deepest capacity possible in problem analysis and organizational capacity, culture building. So our role as a leadership team is to get master problem solvers at every level of the organization to include teachers and support staff and to build a deep infrastructure for improvement at every level of the organization. (Green, Interview 2015)

In a similar manner, Dr. Jones, in the Oak Park District, described his responsibility to his staff to support their professional development so that they could be effective at the classroom level:

As a superintendent or as a principal my job is to sort of provide that [learning] for our teachers and for our principals and my job is to help them be excellent at their jobs and if they are successful, I'm successful (Jones, Interview 2015).

Ms. Wilson echoed the statements of Dr. Jones and Dr. Green in discussing her role as leader:

I really feel that in this role, your whole job is to build capacity for the organization whether it's for teaching staff your paras and your parents and your kids. What do you do to create the conditions for all those things to happen (Wilson, Interview 2015)?

The leaders of Maple Leaf, Oak Park, and Pinedale all recognized the role they played to set up the ongoing professional development of staff to increase teacher and principal quality for student growth. The superintendents took multiple approaches to the professional growth provided to build quality staff and address student needs.

*Developing educators into effective problem solvers.*

The literature surrounding organizational leadership emphasizes the need of leaders to possess the skills to use data to identify issues and needs in the organization, to suggest strategies to address the issues and to monitor the effectiveness of those strategies (Hall & Hord, 2011; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). Dr. Green set up the professional learning for teachers and principals on how to problem solve to address the needs of individual learners. She described her belief in how effective and strategic problem solving had the power to close gaps for all learners:

When you're looking at what are the research bases that are proven to be gap closing, all that matters with what defines strong reading practice, math practice, strong principles for innovative technology, how you operate the organization, has to be around effective problem solving research systems, adult learning theory, and motivation. (Green, Interview 2015)

I got into really the research around continuous improvement. I think the biggest piece that when we are looking at serving all children is how do you develop deep capacity of the adult to problem solve well for every child they are serving, to make sure they can be successful in their post-secondary transitions? (Green, Interview 2015)

Dr. Green believed the skill of problem solving was key to support growth and learning for all students. If staff could master this skill and embed it in practice, then they could begin to close gaps.

Ms. Wilson echoed this belief when speaking of the type of professional learning she sought to provide:

For me the biggest thing that you can do is give them the understanding of a bunch of different measures, data and what do they really mean and give them the tools to analyze that and then give them more and more tools in their toolkit to be responsive educators.

So that's the biggest thing that we can do. (Wilson, Interview 2015)

These statements from Dr. Green and Ms. Wilson reflected recognition that they needed their staff to act in a responsive way to the individual needs of the students they served. This supports the beliefs expressed around culturally responsive practices in that instructors should instruct and respond to students in a more personalized manner to address learning needs (Gay, 2002).

*Building the capacity of educators to instruct in a culturally responsive manner.*

The superintendents also recognized the increasing diversity of their districts in terms of race and socio-economic class and acknowledged that a White and middle class population made up the majority of their staff. The research on CRP describes how these pieces may create gaps in the learning process if the school staff does not possess an awareness of the impact of culture and race in learning (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Singleton and Linton, 2005). The leaders in Birchwood, Oak Park, Pinedale and Tamarack not only recognized the need for staff to develop cultural awareness and the ability to provide culturally responsive instruction, but also took steps to provide CRP training to staff. Both Dr. Davis and Ms. Wilson engaged their new staff in a consortium specific to addressing gaps and brought in experts and literature from the field of CRP to support staff learning. Dr. Davis provided examples of the type of CRP training his staff experienced over the past year:

You know right now we are in [a] closing achievement gap consortium and we're bringing in [author] Robyn Jackson. All of our new teachers this year, we had 7 of them, went to a training session where she talked about culturally responsive teaching and then we're bringing her back again and I purchased a copy of [a] book that was about working with reluctant learners that she wrote and we are doing book studies with that for the whole staff and so there is some real focus.

At the middle school they really focused in on closing the achievement gap, but they really focused in on the culturally responsive teaching and the bias and they even had [a university professor of urban educational leadership] who came and

talked to the student body and the staff about this closing of the achievement gap.  
(Davis, Interview 2015)

As part of the same district consortium as Birchwood, Ms. Wilson described the CRP training in which her staff participated:

As part of the new achievement gap consortium all new teachers go through training together with other districts. We had Dr. Robyn Jackson in this year as part of that and we're doing continued book studies so we have some really targeted development for new staff whether they're a veteran teacher or not, but kind of getting them in and talking about philosophical views. (Wilson, Interview 2015)

Dr. Davis and Ms. Wilson demonstrated their ability to identify leaders and resources beyond their district that could provide non-white perspectives on Culturally Responsive Practices to a majority White staff in order to better support the instruction of Black students.

In the Oak Park and Tamarack districts, leaders created internal supports and experts to provide professional learning to all staff whether they worked directly with students or not. Dr. Jones described the adult learning classes his district offered to staff members that focused on issues of equity for students of color:

Some of the other things that were working on to change hearts and minds, we have a pretty significant professional development system that provides equity achievement gap sorts of classes for educators.

We are holding in the next couple of months a hidden curriculum class which discusses how we may be unintentionally structuring our materials and instruction

to not be addressing the needs of a wide range of racial and ethnic groups. The second example would be an equity class that we held on two different occasions that explores implicit bias and helps people discover their experiences and attitudes and beliefs that they may or may not be aware of and we've had book talks that list of 5 different books and different groups selected a book and different individuals lead the discussion and that occurred both here and in buildings. (Jones, Interview 2015)

Dr. Jones noted that the classes and professional development on building environments of equity extended beyond the teachers to all staff members working in and around the schools:

[The] director of equity and student achievement does [professional development] not only with teachers but with our Para educators, our cooks, our custodians, our bus drivers, with our school board. Our school board has done training as well we provide reading to them as well as have them do work sessions and professional board [professional development]. (Jones, Interview 2015)

In addition to in-district training, Dr. Jones built the capacity of his staff to lead professional development around CRP by sending them out of district for some of their learning.

We also started a sort of grow your own, train the trainer program with the National Equity Project in California and we send people out there (Jones, Interview 2015).

Dr. Jones' actions demonstrated a commitment to building the capacity of all staff members across his district to engage in culturally responsive practices in order to develop an educational system of equity.

Dr. Greben, in the Tamarack District, also took steps similar to those of Dr. Jones in his effort to build educational environments that promoted equity in learning. He described how he utilized similar organizations to train staff on CRP:

We have engaged Pacific Education Group to do *Beyond Diversity I and II* and that takes us to a certain place and then we are really kind of looking at what do we do now. What do we do to build internal capacity? So another group that we are working with on that internal capacity building is the National Equity Project. (...) They met with us and our administrative team for a retreat. (Greben, Interview 2015)

He discussed his work with local leadership to challenge his staff on current practices and to engage them in discussions around difficult conversations on race and equity:

We work with [a university professor of urban educational leadership]. So he has been working with our high school. This is his third year I think. The professional development that he has done there, it's been brutal, it's just been brutal up there but so necessary and he has just been so good for us, so that's largely taking place at the high school, but they have done a book study and they are just developing believers in this, slowly, but the cohort of believers now is probably 3 times larger than it was two years ago so that kind of scaling is awesome. (Greben, Interview 2015)

Dr. Greben and Dr. Jones both demonstrated how they sustained training in, and the use of, CRP by using resources that created internal leadership and capacity around those practices. Building staff member capacity to engage in CRP played a key role in leaders' ability to implement changes at a systems level to address issues causing gaps for Black students and to create environments to close them.



***Implementing organizational changes to create systems of equity.***

The superintendents in this study described their roles as leading the development of their staff to support the growth of all levels of learners. They also recognized their responsibility to drive systemic change when they identified issues within schools that acted as barriers to the success of all students. Their descriptions of the causes for these gaps identified race, poverty and cultural differences as contributing factors to inequities in their systems. They took approaches that involved the implementation of a continuous improvement cycle, the reshaping of educational culture, the awareness building around system inequities and the recruitment of diverse staff in order to build systems equity.

***Developing systems of continuous improvement to address learning gaps.***

Continuous improvement, derived in part by W. Edwards Deming during the post WWII era, involves the ongoing review of system processes to improve effectiveness (Deming, 2016). In a school system, this involves looking at sources of student data around academics, behavior, and participation; for example and determining ways to make improvements in those areas. Through the use of this data driven process the leaders identified ways to close gaps for Black students. Dr. Davis, in Birchwood, described how his staff used data to inform decisions around student supports:

Our decisions are very data driven and I wish I could tell you that that's me, it's not. We have some very talented people(...) the director of teaching and learning, my principals are very good at analyzing data and using their staff to you know, on their building leadership teams, their psych, counselors, to make data drive decisions. So that's the

message, that we look at data and we don't bury our heads in the sand and we work collaboratively as a staff to narrow the gaps. (Davis, Interview 2015)

In Hickory Hills, Dr. Harris supported his staff's identification of specific growth targets that students must achieve at various levels to experience success throughout their educational careers:

The views of access to literature and vocabulary growth are strong components to what makes the student successful in college and career and the if they are going to pass through. So what we did is we took, we supposed to have every student get a 25 or higher on the ACT. We took those kids over the last 5 years that had a 25 and drilled back and built a profile all the way to kindergarten. So if you want to be a 25 you need to know your upper and lower case letters by December in kindergarten. You need to know all of your sounds by March. So we build all of our instruction and assessments off of that gate and we will see where it takes us so literacy and numeracy will be key components. (Harris, Interview 2015)

Dr. Harris also assured that each school maintained a focus on closing learning gaps for students:

We have implementation teams at each [school]. As part of their continuous improvement we require each school's continuous improvement plan to have a strand of improvement that deal specifically with achievement gaps in their buildings. (Harris, Interview 2015)

Dr. Davis and Dr. Harris showed how they guided staff through a deep examination of the data to uncover ways to improve learning and address gaps. This practice equipped the staff with the knowledge and the tools to act in a responsive way when students struggled in the

classroom. The leaders not only used data to improve how staff addressed gaps in the classroom, but also to shift mindsets within the system.

Traditionally school leaders may review data from their schools to inform the status of student learning and behavior. The leaders in this study took data analysis further by using it as a tool to raise awareness of systemic issues leading to gaps for Black students. They saw data as a means to move stakeholder mindsets around who owned the responsibility for gaps for this population and how to address it. In Hickory Hills, Dr. Harris reviewed data and processes to help teachers work more effectively with students of all ability and color so that they felt confident in how to support the student. He described the impact of that work:

Last year 93% of our students left 3rd grade proficient in reading and math. It was the highest ever. We think by the end of 2016-17 we will have 100% proficiency and the research tells us that we are there and we are going to see a dramatic reduction in special ed. costs, discipline costs, opportunity cost. So we've been purposely shifting the focus from why is Johnny, being a disabled student whose from [an inner city school], joining us? Why is he broke? Into what is the system doing to ensure every student all the time? It just shifted the focus from being a teacher burden to the system is going to fix this.

(Harris, Interview 2015)

Here, Dr. Harris used data to shift mindset on how teachers viewed students who did not fit with the majority population. He wanted to move teachers away from focusing on the learning deficits of the student, to focusing on the deficits in the educational system that created learning difficulties. In this way, teachers could focus on ways to shift instructional practices to support student growth

Dr. Green, in the Maple Leaf District, similarly, saw the use of data as the key to creating stakeholder buy in to change the trajectory of student growth for the better. She believed that if she could show her teachers how to utilize data to pinpoint students' learning needs and then utilize data to measure their instructional effectiveness, then they would experience greater success with even the most struggling students.

When you build a culture that's evidence-based and you do a deep level of training and a deep level of support, regular culture building, cheerleading, the affirmation of everyone's working hard. We're doing a great job individually affirming people that are pushing the envelope in the right direction, then your building that sense of team we know what direction we're headed. (Green, Interview 2015)

The ability to use data to show staff were closing gaps supported Dr. Green's ability to implement cultural change and a positive educational environment.

In Oak Park, Dr. Jones used financial data to similarly motivate community stakeholders to want to act on and support the success of students in poverty. In this passage he discussed his strategy for communication with local business partners to gain their support around investing in resources for his high poverty student population:

I think that helping our community understand what we need to do for those that are less fortunate that benefits everybody. When I talk to the business community and basically say look part of our mission that's critical to all of you, it's just take the last ten percent of our students who are at risk of not succeeding, not graduating and going to prison and making sure they are educated, making sure that they have a reasonable family life, that they are working, paying taxes, and that you're not spending \$40,000 putting them in jail

forever. So in my view our job is to make sure you pay less for the welfare system that will have to support this last 10% unless we do something different up front so I'd rather have all of you pay \$5,000 per kid more so that you don't spend \$40,000 a year in prison and they do listen. (Jones, Interview 2015)

Dr. Jones communicated the message that when those most in need experienced success, all reaped the benefits. He built the case of community stakeholders using existing data to push for supports for marginalized students. He also raised awareness of the need for equity and how to address it with his board through data and school goals. He described that here:

There are presentations to the school board, each school reports out on their school goal which have to have an element of equity and achievement gap. Every school reports to the board and to me on an annual basis and they do that both qualitatively and quantitatively so part of it is show us the numbers that show what progress you're making and the other would be we want the narrative of what you're doing that tells the story. (Jones, Interview 2015)

Dr. Jones also used data to garner support from his board and his community to implement changes that could build greater equity for students at a systems level.

Ms. Wilson, in the Pinedale District, used data in a similar manner to Dr. Jones in order to build awareness of the current state of her schools with the board during her first year as the superintendent. The perception existed that the schools in the district performed at the highest level across all populations, but Ms. Wilson sought to raise awareness of the existing gaps in learning and access through data. She described the journey she initiated with her board:

We're taking those first steps so when you talk about really analyzing it my path is to put the data together in a manner that gives you an accurate picture of performance, at not just an attention to your academic indicators, but also to your perception data and other indicators. You have to look at that 360 degree view of data and you have to analyze what opportunities are there for kids. So it's kind of the deep reflection around where we are.

We're going to take a year and we're like 'hey if you're interested come and join us' and we are watching our audience as we share some graphs where 'hey that wasn't pretty numbers' and people are going like 'whoa' great let's talk about that. So you know a lot of places where they only want to me to paint the pretty picture for the public, I need to paint the whole picture otherwise I have no impetus for change. I'll have everyone holding true to the way we always did it or will feel a sense of loss we're doing it different now (...) and you know it's a sense of loss rather than they are doing something amazing. So we're using those opportunities to bring that front and center. (Wilson, Interview 2015)

In those passages, Ms. Wilson expressed the need to use data to both create an awareness of the real issues in student learning for the district and to create a sense of urgency to address them so that she could begin the process of implementing system change in what has been a static learning environment.

The leaders of Pinedale, Hickory Hills, and Oak Park used district data to raise awareness and shift mindsets around the gaps in education experienced by Black students. These data also

helped them enter into conversations around the importance of cultural awareness in the classroom, which made up another strategy of how these leaders tackled systemic change to close gaps.

*Shifting from systems of status quo to systems of equity.*

The districts in the study have served majority White students for decades and, as a result, have long operated through a system whose curriculum and pedagogy revolve around the traditions of the White and middle class. With their populations becoming more diverse in recent decades and the widening gaps of non-traditional students in the system, the superintendents recognized the need to shift the culture of their educational system. In order to shift culture, these leaders engaged staff in reflections about race and learning, they developed strategic plans around cultural responsiveness and closing gaps, and they built systems of individualized instruction.

Dr. Davis saw the need to build recognition of existing biases within the system to move district culture. Here, he expressed that in order to meet the needs of a diverse population, teachers needed more than just solid teaching strategies:

I think the real key and a lot of districts are starting to realize this is that you can pick up any article and find a lot about strategies, teaching strategies you know, but less about the actual attitudes we have and the bias that we have that we need to acknowledge before we can move forward so it's our attitudes that we have to understand before we can really have success with students who are so much different than us. (Davis, Interview 2015)

He cited the need for teachers to engage in reflection of their own attitudes towards students and learning in order to have an instructional impact. He went on to explain ways in which districts could engage staff in these types of reflection and discussions:

I think you bring in some African American speakers to talk about that and like we did with our new teachers, to talk about an understanding. The world that these kids live in is much different than the world that you live in and getting to see empathy. I think having people who have been successful with minority students talk to students and talk, and even if they are all White teachers to talk about you know I had success and it wasn't all about the strategies. It wasn't just about having a different type of intervention or a group worker, it was about really understanding where these kids are coming from. I think um, we try to get teachers to really understand the environment that they work in, but our teachers have got to sometimes drive an hour into [the city] to see where these kids live, to see the house they live in, the neighborhood they live in, what the houses look like and what it's like at 5 o'clock or 6 o'clock when these kids get home and I think they'd appreciate a little more maybe. (Davis, Interview 2015)

Dr. Davis' emphasized the need for teachers to understand the backgrounds and environments from which their Black students came. His beliefs reflect Ladson-Billings' (1995b) assertion that learning for many students of color is impeded by an educational system that reflects only the values of the White, dominant culture. In other districts, the leaders not only stressed reflection on racial bias and attitudes as a means to move school culture, but have made the elimination of bias and the gaps resulting from bias part of the district's goals and actions.



Dr. Harris prioritized the closing of gaps for the most marginalized populations of students in his district. Here he explains how the district's success depended upon the success of all of its students:

As a system to truly have met our mission we have to move the kids that are in the disaggregate groups and in particular it's our African American with disabilities and poverty category. If we moved that student segment we will have changed the trajectory of their life created intrinsic rewards to our lives and raise all of those it's that simple. (Harris, Interview2015)

Similar to the priorities set by Dr. Harris in Hickory Hills, the districts of Oak Park and Tamarack each had explicit goals around the support for students of color and environments of equity. Oak Park's goal emphasized the importance of building inclusive learning environments:

Extend and enhance efforts to create an inclusive and empathetic culture for all students, with a specific emphasis on minority, special needs, English Language Learners and LGBT students. (Oak Park District Website, 2015)

Tamarack's goal targeted the elimination of institutionalized practices of inequity:

Equity: We will act to eliminate gaps and barriers between our mission and the policies, practices, and structures that may perpetuate systemic inequalities. In addition, we seek to remove the predictability of successes and failure that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor. (Tamarack District Website, 2015)

The goals set by these districts, focused on closing gaps and building equity, demonstrated a commitment and priority by the leaders to address the needs of marginalized student populations.

Like Oak Park and Tamarack, the district of Maple Leaf also had district and school level goals to target the closing of gaps, but Dr. Green also wished to shift the overall focus on assuring that all students succeeded over time. She explained faults in focusing on gap closure as an overall goal:

We're not focused just on the gaps. We are focused on all kids thriving so if you're focused only on the gaps you can reduce your gaps by lowering the top performers in the organization. That isn't your goal right, so you want to focus on all kids thriving and having a portion of your population making accelerated progress. I believe again 10 years from now we're not just going to be talking about gap closing we're going to be talking about all kids thriving. (Green, Interview 2015)

She recognized the ability to manipulate data to demonstrate that a district was closing gaps and that to address the real issues, schools needed to identify actions that allowed all students to be successful. For some leaders this recognition also required a shift in staffing and leadership to move the district culture.

*Building a school staff more reflective of the student population.*

All of the superintendents in this study acknowledged that their staff demographics, mostly White and middle class, were disproportionate to the students' demographics. The literature on Culturally Responsive Practices explains how a majority White teaching force for students of color may result in learning gaps and behavior issues resulting from the disconnects in cultural experiences and the inherent bias teachers may bring into the classroom (Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley, Irvine, Nieto, Shofield & Steven, 2001; Carter, 2005; Taylor, 2010; White-Clark, 2005). In addition to the CRP training that the superintendents in the study

provided to their teaching staff, many of the leaders sought ways to hire Black staff in leadership and teaching positions to reduce the cultural gaps and bias in their schools. Dr. Davis explained how the district took genuine steps towards recruiting educators of color beyond just paying lip service to the issue:

You know a lot of times things are just a dog and pony shows, but here, this group, we had a recruitment fair that was really focusing on minorities. (Davis, 2015)

In addition to job fairs, Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben initiated “grow your own” programs to support Black students in the district to take positions in education. Dr. Jones explained the program that his district built to recruit more educators of color:

So here we've just been trying to work on grow your own programs with both high school students and non-certified staff that are Black or Hispanic to go back to school so that we can cultivate them to work here and live in the community and it's a really long road though and everyone is sort of competing to hire more African Americans and Hispanics in school and there's just a little supply. (Jones, Interview 2015)

Dr. Greben described the success his district saw in developing a more diverse staff through recruitment and student support:

All of our principals are White and our teachers, just under 12% is that of color and that is huge for us because that has doubled in one year and we are really proud of that. We have a long ways to go because you have about 33% give or take students of color. (...) We understand that we have a long way to go and we've done things like grow your own programs with support staff and using our students. We are really, really active locally with the universities. We give out scholarships for undergraduate. We've hosted get-

togethers here of pre-service teachers of color giving them gas cards, guaranteed them interviews. We have gone so far as to hand out contracts to people, staff of color without knowing exactly what position they are going to take and not necessarily even having a position but pretty certain we would so it just takes that kind of effort. (Geben, Interview 2015)

In addition to “grow your own” programs, Dr. Geben created leadership positions specific to supporting the district’s shift toward greater cultural responsiveness and towards equity.

We have a Director of Equity and Student Achievement that look specifically at how we can assist and support our minority students. We have an ELL Director that also works at each one of our schools and our district has an equity achievement gap goal (Geben, Interview 2015).

Creating a director position dedicated to implementing and leading equitable practices for all students illustrated Dr. Geben’s commitment to closing gaps and creating positive change for Black students and all students. Through the implementation of student, teacher, and system supports to close gaps for Black students, the superintendents in this study demonstrated their dedication to create positive learning environments for their Black student populations. Their district goals also demonstrated their commitment to effectively serving diverse populations and creating systems of equity.

These commitments, however, have not gone unchallenged. A true test of their dedication to the work came in their ability to face and overcome the barriers to implementing the needed changes to positively impact the educational outcomes for Black students.

### **Perseverance through the challenges of creating systems of equity.**

Challenges to implementing equitable learning environments for Black students made the ability to close gaps a slow process for most superintendents in the study. The leaders expressed frustration over the forces that worked against them when attempting to change educational practices to increase positive learning outcomes for Black students. These forces and challenges arose from political issues at the district and state level and from the White privilege born by many members of majority White districts.

### ***Personal and political values as barriers to equity.***

Political barriers in these districts are best defined as push back from the state government, local governing institutions, and existing community values that challenge the ability of leaders to enact change or move away from traditional systems of education. This created challenge for the superintendents who wanted to implement changes to the teaching and learning system to address the needs of the more diverse populations living in the district and for those students attending the schools, but resided outside the community.

Dr. Dunn of Cherry Grove found himself in a unique political dynamic when he accepted the position. He expressed his good fortune of accepting a job in a district that placed a high value on education, but he came to understand that with that value also came strong political power wielded by a veteran teaching staff. He described how this power challenged his ability to develop environments of equity for Black students and to build a responsive culture among the staff:

Because you're talking about elementary teachers that have been highly successful in the community that loves its education and has teachers that are revered as these very

important people which is wonderful and that's where I want to teach that's where I want to be a superintendent where education is a priority, but it comes at somewhat of a cost. If teachers become the idolized people who are ingrained in these old types of stereotypes, who are making poor decisions for a few of our kids, they have a lot of sway in the community and in our region and I'm told this isn't just beyond our district, but in our region. Their M.O. is to be able to have teachers talk to parents and parents talk to the school board at the cost of administrators' jobs and support at the board level where teachers then stay in place, and it's not evolving purposes and is not being inclusive and it's 'they're right and you're wrong' and that creates somewhat of an interesting power dynamic so that they can stay under cover as embracing diversity in a high achieving district and be good teachers. (Dunn, Interview 2015)

When describing his district's largest gap issue, Dr. Dunn cited the inequitable treatment of Black students in terms of classroom discipline and expressed his desire to educate staff on how to recognize their bias when working with this population. He faced a challenging road ahead to engage staff in crucial conversations about race because many of the veteran staff professed to embrace all students, but their actions did not reflect that belief. Further, when he did challenge their mode of thinking, he put his own position in the district at risk because of the power teachers held in the community.

We've had a lot of different dynamics in which to play, you know, like 'good little white teacher, and, I'm being condescending, but saying like 'I embrace diversity. I've done all these things and I volunteered for everything' and [some teachers really have] but these [Black] kids are getting sorted out [of the classroom] and it's part of the culture. So from a superintendent standpoint I think it's important, especially for the principals, to also be

able to understand those dynamics and to be able to have those conversations and from the superintendent's role to support those conversations to happen and have a board that you're working with have an understanding that when people are coming to speak at the board meetings and when these teachers are revered that's fine, we'll provide the opportunity for this voice, but there's things going on here that our data supports that this needs to happen in order for these numbers to change. (Dunn, Interview 2015)

Despite the risk, Dr. Dunn recognized the need to engage his staff in conversations around race and to take on teachers when they exhibited practices with inherent racial bias or discrimination because the actions of some teachers perpetuated gaps for Black students.

Dr. Dunn went on to express concern that he would not have the time or opportunity to move these conversations forward given the current power that teachers held and the potential for annual school board member turnover:

From a superintendent standpoint, the reality is every year at least you've got three out of five board members who are voted in by the community who may not want to have you back. So there are some political issues that could potentially come up and that's one of the big crisis in our country is that the average tenure in our superintendent positions are two and a half to three years and these are 10 year conversations that we need to have for you to have enough credibility to be able to move systems and with that type of turnover you'd never be able to sustain programs or conversations. (Dunn, Interview 2015)

For Dr. Dunn, engaging staff in conversations about race and confronting bias in how they responded to Black students posed potential political backlash that could result in loss of his job. In order to implement district change to support environments of equity, he needed to shift

current power dynamics and build community support for district leadership. Shifting a community away from what they have traditionally embraced requires time and energy at multiple levels. Each community in this study came with its unique set of values that have existed for decades without much disruption. Adult community members had a certain vision of how schools worked best for them and they clung to that system, believing it to be the best for their children as well.

***Persuading stakeholders to break from traditional values.***

The most often identified challenge to building systems of equity in this study involved difficulties in changing traditional systems of education that have supported gaps rather than closed them. An example of this was district tracking systems, systems that can result in Black students making up the majority of the lowest or remedial tracks and White students filling the majority in the honors tracks (Darling-Hammond, 2010, Howard, 2010). The superintendents all recognized the issues created by track systems in their districts, but realized the difficulty in eliminating this structure.

Dr. Davis, in the Birchwood District, explained the detrimental impact of the track system and the challenge of moving away from this type of educational system:

They [staff and community] need to really have a good understanding of ability grouping and tracking (...) in terms of trying to serve kids of color and low socioeconomic status. You have lower ability kids in lower ability tracks and once there, the research says once they are in a lower track, they are always going to be in that and teachers have less expectations for them and they don't perform at a high level. Often the class is filled with 30% minority population in a school and it's a lower track, usually 25% of those kids are



people of color, you know so anything that would allow that is just wrong, it's just fundamentally wrong. So I think you know providing that kind of research with your staff and with your community is tough because we're more comfortable with a track system. We are more comfortable separating people and ability grouping them. (Davis, Interview 2015)

Dr. Dunn, in the Cherry Grove District, addressed this challenge by recognizing his role in educating the community to issues with traditional education and the tracking system and created mechanisms for cultivating buy in for the recommended. In Oak Park and Tamarack, the leaders also acknowledged the issues of traditional education that held students of color back. They saw as not only a local community issue, but a problem arising out of traditional White American values; a value that held to the notion that opportunity must be earned rather than provided for students in need. Here, Dr. Jones explained the need to educate White America that one's ability to succeed went deeper than just hard work:

I don't know that our White, middle class population is aware of the implicit disadvantages and biases that exist in the community. As a White community, a Black president, everybody is part of the same economic system, it's all fair, There's no problems, you know. If somebody got thrown in jail. it's their fault and, you know, you need to sort of pull up your bootstraps and help yourself. So I think that we have to battle maybe a simplistic view of a society, and I'm not arguing against sort of self-reliance or sort of the individualism and destiny of hard work because I do believe in that, but it's not that simple. (Jones, Interview 2015)

Echoing the sentiments of Dr. Jones, Dr. Greben, in the Tamarack District, explained how Americans needed to flip their perspective on how individuals gained access to opportunity to create equity:

Then attached to that is my belief that the old way of thinking is based on meritocracy. Through the old way of thinking, you have to prove yourself in order to have opportunity so you have to have success before you have opportunity and in my work and my belief is to flip that. You have to have opportunities to be successful and that is the piece that really frankly gets me into more trouble than anything else because it is a paradigm that frankly our country isn't built on. We are built on a meritocracy so and there's just a lot of push back to that and it manifests in a lot of different ways. It manifests in things like well “you are dumbing down the curriculum” and “you don't have any expectations.” “You're going to ruin it for everyone” when you try to make more opportunities for kids of color, in particular, to be successful and breaking down all of those traditional privilege barriers that has largely kept kids of color out of those opportunities. (Greben, Interview 2015)

Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben both sought to reshape the perspective of the members of their primarily White, middle class communities to understand how some students of color, and Black students in particular, faced more systemic challenges than White peers, which made opportunity difficult to attain despite hard work (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). A desire of these communities to hold onto their traditional systems of education may result from their desire to retain the privileges that they have as a result of their White race (Decuir & Dixon, 2004, Ladson-Billings, 1998). The institution of White Privilege in the educational system created even greater challenges the leaders in these communities to develop systems of equity.

***Working within and calling out systems of White privilege.***

Peggy McIntosh (1993) describes and reflects on the phenomenon of White Privilege stating, “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious” (p.1). She goes on to describe elements of White Privilege such as the ability to be surrounded by people of her own race most of the time and the assurance that her children will learn through curricular materials that reflect the images and stories of White people. The superintendents of Hickory Hills, Oak Park and Tamarack each cited White privilege as a challenge to their ability to create equitable learning environments for Black students. Dr. Harris, in having worked previously in an urban and more diverse district, described how unprepared he was to address the pushback stemming from White privilege in the community:

One thing I was not prepared for and had to experience was the whole anti White privilege push. Our community is a home base for a lot of right-wing beliefs and we have a contingency in our community that believes that some of this multicultural and social justice stuff is really about you riding White privilege and this whole diversity movement is Obama driven. I wasn't prepared for the anti-underdog push back and it's not just subtle. It's in elected officials and so just navigating that while still staying true to your core values is something I've had to spend a lot of time quietly thinking through. It's been frustrating. (Harris, Interview 2015)

Dr. Harris faced both an internal and external battle when fighting for systems of equity. His years serving in a leadership capacity for the district were a testament to his determination to continue the fight for equity despite the challenge of White privilege in the community.

A community's lack of understanding about White privilege may lead them to question a superintendent's actions to create equitable learning environments for Black students. Yet, educating community members on the existence of White privilege, to address their pushback, poses an even greater challenge. However, Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben both took steps to raise awareness about the role White privilege plays in the educational system.

Dr. Jones explained how many of his White families did not understand their privilege in terms of their children's access to resources compared to the access of Black students or students in poverty. He provided an example of the type of thinking he confronted with some of the White families:

I think much of White society would probably say 'oh no my child should get the same \$8,000 worth of stuff in fact maybe more because I know how to advocate' than the Black student and I think that's one of the dilemmas that we have that equal isn't necessarily equitable and so that's the battle that we have to fight. (Jones, Interview 2015)

Like the parents in Oak Park, the parents in Birchwood also challenged the allocation of resources in the district as it related to Black students. Dr. Davis described how parents questioned the spending of district dollars on resources to support the students enrolled in the district integration program:

I see this as a potential problem in that some parents realize that much of the students that we have of color are either through open enrollment or the integration program. And that makes class sizes higher and since we acknowledge that some of our lower performing students are students of color and lower socioeconomic status they consume some

resources and you have to have more interventionists and without more interventionists could you have more opportunities or more electives or smaller class sizes or whatever? I think it's even become more difficult because of the new budget in terms of serving students. The \$12,000 cap now is really going to affect us a lot and that may eliminate some of our diversity in terms of diverse race and ethnicity. (Davis, Interview 2015)

Dr. Davis worried that parental concerns, along with budget constraints, would not support resources for the higher levels of need of students coming from the city. Eliminating the integration program in Birchwood would significantly reduce the diversity, which Dr. Davis viewed as value added for districts.

Whenever I'm speaking about the experiences of integration program students, I'm celebrating that, that we are involved in that program, that we have a large population of these students, that our goals at the building level have been to narrow the achievement gap. (Davis, Interview 2015)

Dr. Davis did not view these students as a burden on the system, but instead as students with whom he could make a difference and create successful outcomes. For him, many of these students came into the system with a deficit and he believed the district should play a role in eliminating that deficit.

In Tamarack, Dr. Greben also addressed parental concerns over resource allocations to students of color. In his case, the resource involved access to upper level coursework like advanced placement curriculum. He explained the concern over opening up Advanced Placement courses to more students of color that was expressed by White families accustomed to having upper level coursework reserved exclusively for them:

We tripled the number of underrepresented kids in AP classes in one year and then that growth continues and in addition to that, the benchmark group which is White and Asian kids, that number went up considerably, so it's one of those things where the mindset is 'oh so you're going to have more Black and Brown kids in AP classes' and that automatically means that 'it's going to be dumbed down, the curriculum is going to be dumbed down and my kid is going to suffer because those kids can't possibly keep up with the pace' (...) so long story short is it raised everybody's boat. The pass rate for kids for all kids in AP classes was higher than it was in the regular core classes and that includes a ton more kids of color who historically would not have been in there and when you show that data it's like 'that doesn't comport with my thinking so what's the fix?' So it isn't even like 'Gosh maybe I was wrong,' it's like 'what's the fix? What's up with that?' so I mean our internal struggles continue they are formidable but not unbeatable. (Greiben, 2015)

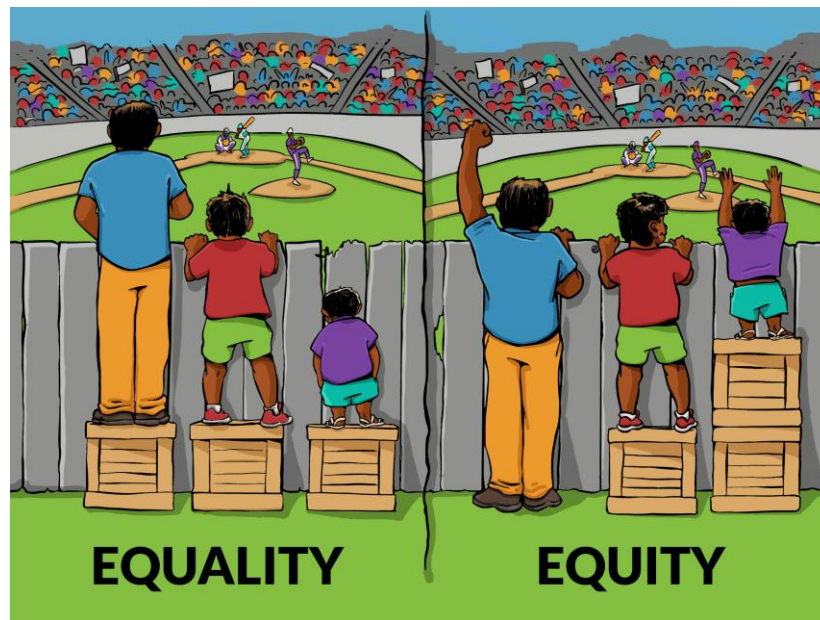
Even when pass rates for AP coursework revealed that all students experience more success with a diverse population, the White community did not retract their initial concerns.

Despite constant pushback from their communities, Dr. Greben, Dr. Davis and Dr. Jones continued the work to create equitable access to coursework and resources for Black students. They recognized these parents have been accustomed to their White students not having to share their educational space with students of color. These leaders' persevered in making these educational spaces more inclusive even in the face of ongoing conflict in the system.

In terms of resource allocation, as in the case for Tamarack, Birchwood and Oak Park, a major challenge for the superintendents involved explaining the difference between systems of

equality and systems of equity. Namely, just because a resource is equally available to all students, does not mean that all students can equally access that resource. As demonstrated by the findings in this study, Black students in mostly White districts experienced difficulty in enrolling in the same classes and activities as White students due to issues like transportation, costs, information gaps and skills gaps. Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben shared an image similar to the one in figure 4.2 when explaining challenges of equity.

Figure 4.2 Image by Angus Maguire (2016) “Illustrating Equality vs. Equity” from the *Interaction Institute for Social Change*



When showing the image, Dr. Greben explained how it exemplified the district’s goals and how White parents continued to struggle with the message of those goals:

Our goal is to meet every kid’s needs, every child succeeds and so that is what we need to be about and we need to understand that that means rearranging those crates and when

you rearrange those crates you'll notice that some have two and one has none and so then you hear from the parents of the one that has none because you're taking something away from me now that I had before and it was structural. (...) They just look at this as you've taken something away from me and now my child is going to be, it is detrimental to him or her and I am outraged. (Geben, Interview 2015)

Dr. Geben spoke to the need to build equity in the district by reallocating resources to fill the gaps that held certain populations of students back, and he described the outcry from some White parents at their concern over losing privileges.

Further complicating the discourse around equity was the struggle with stakeholders who claimed to embrace diversity and all cultures and people, but whose actions reflected an unwillingness to allow for change that might benefit students and people of color. Dr. Geben talked about his frustrations with the challenge of implementing change to build equity in a community that prided itself on embracing diversity and multiculturalism, yet put up barriers to block these changes.

It's a White community. We have had significant push back and what is so, what is such a disconnect is the rhetoric and the action are so disjointed and this is a huge leadership struggle whether you're a principal or a superintendent because how do you call that out without calling it out? Because once you do, then people get defensive and then they just stop thinking and they go to the limbic system there is no higher than going on 'you're calling me a racist.' They shut down or whatever and that and this and that ends any conversation that you can have and ends almost any chance you have of making a convert so this is like I personally believe this is the leadership challenge for our time. How do



you navigate the disconnect between your rhetoric and your action without shutting you down? (Geben, Interview 2015)

He went on to describe some of the difficult conversations with educators of upper level coursework in the district and those who closed their classes off to Black students through a lack of support, recruitment and encouragement.

You could say for a teacher who has had no kids of color in any class ever, what are you doing to encourage them? [the teacher responds] “what are you calling me a racist? You're calling me a racist.” But they're not prepared for this. [the teacher asks] “you want me to lower my standards?” You know, it's just fight or flight, eat or be eaten sort of thing. (Geben, Interview 2015)

For Dr. Geben, his major barrier involved understanding how to help community members and educators to see the hypocrisy between their rhetoric and actions. He needed them to understand the duplicity between their claim to support diversity while blocking changes that reallocated resources to create equity and level the educational playing field.

Dr. Geben did not, however, express desire to back down from this equity stance despite the pushback. He and some of his stakeholders viewed this challenge from parents as a sign their work made an impact on building equity for Black students. Here, he reflects on growth the district made and feedback he received from a local community member:

I would say a growing and emerging strength is our responsiveness to kids who have historically not done so well. We have a long ways to go with regards to that, but it is emerging and that is frankly what is spooking some people and why we have more people coming to board meetings to protest what we are doing, more letters to the editor,

and one of the Black pastors that we work with a lot said to our board president the other day ‘if you've got the White people upset, you know you are doing something because if they're not upset then they have no reason to be upset. Nothing is disrupting their privilege. When you start disrupting that, that is when you start to get push back.’  
(Greiben, Interview 2015)

He provided transparency around the changes made for his stakeholders and demonstrated the will to engage in tough conversations about the work.

In this study, not all of the leaders felt they had the ability to operate with that type of transparency given the district’s political climate and values.

***‘Race’ as the other four letter word.***

All of the superintendents of this study expressed a passion for assuring that Black students have the resources and opportunities they needed to succeed in school. During their interviews they shared their desire to address and close gaps for Black students, but some leaders could not express that desire openly in the district. Dr. Thomas, formerly of Spruceland, reflected on his frustration over the barriers to engage board and community members in conversations to address gaps for students of color.

It is not something that wants to be talked about especially in terms of socioeconomic and I think that is almost a way to not even address any minority issues. In terms of African Americans, no one ever wanted to have any discussions based on ethnicity and furthermore one time the town manager said that people in this town do not want to talk about poverty or our increasing low-income kids and they don't want to know about or even worry about low income. (Thomas, Interview 2015)

Dr. Thomas recognized the need to have conversations about the gaps he observed in the district data, but the culture of the district did not support it.

Never could I really engage or have a conversation with the administrative team or village leaders or the board about any types of deficiencies that may be occurring in the district especially around at the city and socioeconomic status (Thomas, Interview 2015).

Here Dr. Thomas reflected on the meetings with the school board and their resistance to discuss any areas of growth the district might have.

We would do a presentation to the board with achievement data, presented with the data that was always presented in a fashion that ‘all is well’ in [this district] and ‘we continue to be the best’ so it was hard to disaggregate and really get into helping students from the district level. (Thomas, Interview 2015)

In Spruceland, Dr. Thomas could not initiate conversations around students in poverty and students of other races or ethnicities who experienced learning and other opportunity gaps because stakeholders failed to acknowledge these populations.

For the superintendents facing similar circumstances to those in Spruceland, they changed their communication style to be more generalized, using language like “all students” or “all learners will succeed.” In doing so, they minimized communications about the need to close gaps for specific populations. These actions were twofold: they genuinely did want all students to succeed and grow and they wanted to avoid further challenges around the work to close gaps for Black students. Dr. Harris, working in a conservative district like Spruceland, explained his internal and external struggles to support environments of equity for students of color and students with special needs:

Our board president is extremely conservative. I know if you came in and said we were going to train every teacher on multiculturalism our board president would say no. You wonder if it's a fit so I've had to learn to adjust to that and I've used the model frequently with our team that you have to decide is it worth sharing right now because what got us here won't get us there. What got us here was the passion and the fire for the underdog and now we're in a political landscape. (Harris, Interview 2015)

He continued by suggesting that many other superintendents faced similar issues when developing an equity-based practice and he described the need to move culture by operating, at times, undercover:

It might be a good follow-up study because the political framework 'what does the superintendent and his ability to purposely work on that culture' look like? So you are working in a system and I'm working in a system. We do it covertly because we have to or maybe not covertly, but its branded something very different 'every student, every time, all the time' is very purposeful so you can fit any subgroup in there. (Harris, Interview 2015)

Dr. Harris' statements about deciding what to share and when suggested he must operate in a undercover manner to work around the barriers set up by White privilege and conservatism in the community and held by the school board. Here he explained why he kept his language guarded when addressing the needs of Black students:

The whole anti-white privilege mindset, that this is all a manufactured crisis. This community has been involved in the [school integration program] for a long time but there is still some veiled racism and sometimes it's not even veiled anymore. Fighting

through stereotypes, understanding cultural differences as opposed to avoiding them, ignoring them to embracing them. (Harris, Interview 2015)

He compared communication from his leadership work in a previous district with greater population diversity to his current, majority White district, noting:

In my previous life it was ‘changing and saving lives’ it was very purposeful because it had to be and in [my previous district] we just call it what it was ‘our Black kids aren't learning’ and no one went crazy. (Harris, Interview 2015)

For Dr. Harris, he must address issues of both hidden and overt racism in the current community even as he leads his staff through the creation of an equitable learning environment for all students. Despite having a community and board resistant to changing the district culture, Dr. Harris continued to push the work to build schools of equity forward, even if he had to do the work undercover.

Any misstep in communication around addressing the needs of Black students in certain districts could be career ending, blocking a leader’s ability to establish school systems built around equity. In fact, the tenure of any superintendent in the Midwestern state in this study is tenuous because of the frequency and ease of school board turnover. The community votes for school board members and the board members determine a leader’s employment with the district. As revealed in this study, what and how a leader communicates becomes key along with whether or not a leader is willing or able to conceal his or her core values to engage in the work to close gaps. This begs further questions around how superintendents overcome community values that support White Privilege and racist ideals in order to improve the quality of education for Black students in predominantly White districts. Until research uncovers an answer or

potential strategies, superintendents with the passion and desire to create change may continue to face this obstacle. In the interim, leaders like Dr. Harris and Dr. Thomas will proceed with quiet perseverance.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications for Future Leaders and Future Research

Through this study I examined how superintendents in majority White and high performing districts in a Midwestern state worked to address opportunity gaps for Black students in their district. With recent research naming this Midwestern state as the worst state in the nation to raise a Black child due to poor access to quality education and high achievement gaps (Annie E. Casey, 2014), understanding how leaders across the state close gaps district-wide is more critical than ever before. I asked three key questions to develop my understanding of these superintendents' work to close opportunity gaps:

1. What is the disposition of the leader based upon his/her views of the problem and how to address it?
2. What actions has the superintendent planned or taken to address learning gaps district wide?
3. How does the environment of the district shape the Superintendent's actions?

In this chapter I analyze those findings based upon the questions posed by this study. I examine the commonalities among the stories presented by the eight leaders in terms of their dispositions, actions and the environments in which they work. I begin by providing a brief recap of each superintendent and the district in which they work.

Table 5.1. *Brief recap of each superintendent and district*

<b>Superintendent</b>	<b>District Name/Characteristics</b>	<b>Political Climate (As identified by leader description &amp; 2012 presidential election results)</b>
Dr. James Davis	<b>Birchwood School District</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• K-8 serving 900 students</li><li>• 71% White, 12% Black, 7% Asian, 5% Hispanic 3% two or more races</li><li>• Low socioeconomic status 12%</li><li>• Black student reading gap 45% below White peers</li></ul>	Moderate to Liberal  2012 Election Results (G.A.B.) 54% Democrat 46% Republican

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Black student math gap 50% below White peers</li> </ul>	
Dr. Harold Dunn	Cherry Grove School District <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>K-12 serving 2100 students</li> <li>66% White, 13% Black, 10% Asian, 6% Hispanic 5% two or more races</li> <li>Low socioeconomic status 19%</li> <li>Black student reading gap 41% below White peers</li> <li>Black student math gap 48% below White peers</li> </ul>	Liberal to moderate  2012 Election Results (G.A.B.) 72% Democrat 27% Republican
Dr. John Harris	Hickory Hills School District <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>K-12 serving 7000 students</li> <li>73% White, 3% Black, 14% Asian, 6% Hispanic 4% two or more races</li> <li>Low socioeconomic status 10%</li> <li>Black student reading gap 30% below White peers</li> <li>Black student math gap 39% below White peers</li> </ul>	Conservative  2012 Election Results (G.A.B.) 32% Democrat 68% Republican
Dr. Mary Green	Maple Leaf Community School District <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>K-12 serving 4050 students</li> <li>75% White, 8% Black, 7% Asian, 5% Hispanic 5% two or more races</li> <li>Low socioeconomic status 16%</li> <li>Black student reading gap 28% below White peers</li> <li>Black student math gap 36% below White peers</li> </ul>	Moderate to conservative  2012 Election Results (G.A.B.) 35% Democrat 64% Republican
Dr. Gregory Jones	Oak Park Area School District <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>K-12 serving 7000 students</li> <li>74% White, 5% Black, 8% Asian, 8% Hispanic 5% two or more races</li> <li>Low socioeconomic status 18%</li> <li>Black student reading gap 38% below White peers</li> <li>Black student math gap 47% below White peers</li> </ul>	Liberal to moderate w/ pockets of conservatism  2012 Election Results (G.A.B.) 51% Democrat 48% Republican
Ms. Erica Wilson	Pinedale School District <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>K-8 serving 475 students</li> </ul>	Liberal to moderate



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 68% White, 13% Black, 9% Asian, 7% Hispanic 4% two or more races</li> <li>• Low socioeconomic status 11%</li> <li>• Black student reading gap 30% below White peers</li> <li>• Black student math gap 35% below White peers</li> </ul>	2012 Election Results (G.A.B.) 62% Democrat 37% Republican
Dr. Joseph Thomas	Spruceland School District <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• K-12 serving 2650 students</li> <li>• 77% White, 3% Black, 5% Asian, 12% Hispanic 2% two or more races</li> <li>• Low socioeconomic status 25%</li> <li>• Black student reading gap 29% below White peers</li> <li>• Black student math gap 30% below White peers</li> </ul>	Fiscally conservative and socially progressive  2012 Election Results (G.A.B.) 44% Democrat 55% Republican
Dr. Mark Greben	Tamarack Area School District <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• K-12 serving 5400 students</li> <li>• 66% White, 7% Black, 4% Asian, 19% Hispanic 4% two or more races</li> <li>• Low socioeconomic status 26%</li> <li>• Black student reading gap 38% below White peers</li> <li>• Black student math gap 44% below White peers</li> </ul>	Liberal to Moderate with pockets of conservatism  2012 Election Results (G.A.B.) 59% Democrat 40% Republican

I also draw comparisons between the stories of the district leaders and those of the teachers and leaders found in the research on Culturally Responsive Practices, who describe their efforts to establish educational environments of equity. Finally, I describe how the dispositions, actions and environment described by the eight leaders connect to theories addressing culture and race. Based upon this analysis I draw conclusions around the stories of these eight leaders as they relate to establishing schools of equity for Black students and I cite implications for future leaders, leadership preparation and research.

## Equity-based Dispositions of Superintendents Making a Difference

The study defined disposition as “a person’s inherent qualities of mind and character” (Oxford Dictionary, 2015). The findings around how the eight superintendents identified the root causes of gaps for Black students and the types of gaps they described provide insight into their overall dispositions; dispositions with a high degree of similarity across each case. Their dispositions also demonstrate connections to the research on Culturally Responsive Practices and Critical Race Theory. Table 5.1 provides a summary of the identified dispositions of the superintendents who sought to make a difference in the learning opportunities for Black students.

Table 5.2 *Dispositions of Superintendents as Difference Makers*

Action	Definition
Reflective and critical thinker	Engagement in ongoing reflection of self and professional practices/growth, ability to see systems and practice through a critical lens, critique status quo
Belief that all students can succeed	Does not use students’ background, race, economic status, ability as an excuse for why student cannot learn. Identifies ways in which the system can support and accommodate students’ learning to create opportunities for success
Willingness to take risks	Challenges the status quo in educational systems and beliefs, engages stakeholders in critical conversations on education about race, ability, poverty
Perseverance	Willingness to continue their work to build equity in the face of community (parent, school board, teacher) pushback

### Dispositions that emerged through the stories of the leaders.

The stories of these eight superintendents describe leaders who are reflective and critical thinkers, who believe all students can and deserve to succeed, and who are willing to take risk and persevere through challenges. Through their stories around the gaps and underlying causes

of gaps, the leaders demonstrated their ability to engage in reflection and critique about their school systems and the role they played within it. All leaders saw issues in the educational system as the primary cause of opportunity gaps. Dr. Davis, Dr Harris, Dr. Thomas and Ms. Wilson identified traditional models of tracking students in the schools, which often led to higher populations of Black student in remedial courses, as a major cause of opportunity. Dr. Dunn described how disparities in the Cherry Grove district discipline system created greater absence and reduced learning opportunities for Black students and contributed to inequity in the school environment. Dr. Green pointed out the dependence of school systems on packaged strategies and outdated educational research as a hindrance in efforts to identify the most effective learning supports for individual students. Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben cited a lack of encouragement and access to advanced coursework as well as access and availability of culturally relevant activities as main contributors to gaps in their schools. All of these stories demonstrate this group of leaders' ability to view the districts through a critical lens in their efforts to identify how best to support Black students.

The leaders also demonstrated a passion to support the success of every student in their district, which came through as they described their philosophies and goals for the districts. Dr. Davis viewed his role as improving the quality of life for every child. Dr. Harris consistently described his passion for helping the “underdog” and repeated the mantra “every student, every time, all the time” (Harris, Interview 2015). Dr. Green professed the need to individualize learning so that every student thrives. Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben reinforced the need to eliminate inequities in the school systems that prevented access to opportunities. Ms. Wilson cited the importance of educating the whole child and perpetuating inclusive practices. Dr. Dunn and Dr. Thomas emphasized the importance of creating engaging schools for all and reaching out to

families to improve student learning and support. Each of these beliefs demonstrated a desire to improve the educational system for all learners.

The stories of the eight superintendents also revealed a willingness to take risks in the district. Each leader shared a story of how they challenged the status quo or enacted unpopular change in an effort to create equity for Black students. Dr. Davis invested in more intervention and social-emotional resources for his Black students with skill and behavior deficits despite arguments from the community that they should spend more money on lower class sizes and enrichment programming. Dr. Dunn took a stand against inequitable discipline consequences for Black and White students held dear by prominent teachers in the community. Dr. Harris eliminated remedial math options for Black students despite teacher and leader pushback. Dr. Green disrupted the entire school system by implementing continuous improvement practices from outside the educational field. Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben encouraged greater participation by Black students to advanced coursework amidst parent argument that would lower expectations in the courses. Ms. Wilson and Dr. Thomas had the courage to inform their boards that district achievement data had gaps, especially for students of color and students in poverty. These leaders all risked continuing in their position to challenge the status quo in the districts in the name of equity for all students.

### **Superintendent disposition in alignment with Culturally Responsive Practices.**

My analysis of the dispositions demonstrated by the leaders in this study most resemble those attitudes and practices identified in the studies of Culturally Relevant Practices, with respect to Black student learning. Their attitudes do not reflect a deficit view of Black students, a view that would blame them or their cultural environment for the observed gaps (Friedman, 1978; Jensen, 1969; Jensen, 1973; Madyun, 2001; Shockley, 1972; Taba, 1964). Holding a

deficit view of Black students would have maintained a status quo in the educational system because it would suggest that no change in that system would lead to higher success rates for Black students. Leaders of this deficit disposition would consider low success rates for Black students the result of their family or community culture or their genetics (Friedman, 1978; Jensen, 1969; Jensen, 1973; Madyun, 2001; Shockley, 1972; Taba, 1964). But my analysis of the findings around eight superintendents' dispositions revealed how they acknowledge that exclusivity within the system and racial bias plays a large role in creating opportunity gaps that lead to lower outcomes of success for Black students. The reflection by these leaders aligns most closely with the attitudes and beliefs of those leaders and teachers within the studies of Culturally Relevant Practices (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ford, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Each of the superintendents' mindsets reflected the following culturally responsive leadership dispositions outlined by Theoharis (2009):

1. Believes that inclusive services and heterogeneous grouping benefit all students
2. Is committed to differentiation and teaming (p.142).

Dr. Davis and Ms. Wilson stressed the need to eliminate tracking systems. Operating with similar beliefs, Dr. Harris closed down remedial courses and Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben pushed back against teachers and White parents who attempted to keep Black students out of advanced coursework. They saw their role as leading the charge to shut down these instances of diminished opportunity and create systems of equity for Black students. In Maple Leaf, Dr. Green's pursuit of a system to individualize instruction through cyclical problem solving similarly sought to create a system of equity. Their actions to close down exclusive structures within the system and empower students with the tools to access challenging courses and experience success reflected

beliefs around the use of inclusive practices and differentiation as part of a CRP leadership disposition (Theoharis, 2009).

The belief that districts should eliminate tracks and that all students should have access to advanced coursework also aligns with research examining the dispositions of teachers with Culturally Relevant Practices. The literature on CRP and teacher dispositions emphasizes the need to have high expectations for all students and the belief that all students can be successful (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morrison, et. al). The push by Dr. Davis, Dr. Harris and Ms. Wilson to remove remedial course tracks and the support of Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben to enroll more Black students in advanced coursework demonstrates a commitment to raising the bar for Black students in the districts.

The leaders' actions around professional development also align with the CRP leader dispositions of demonstrating a commitment in their own learning and that of others to understand and value diversity (Theoharis, 2009). Dr. Davis, Dr. Dunn, Dr. Jones, Ms. Wilson and Dr. Greben have all taken steps to introduce their teaching staff to learning around Culturally Responsive Practices. The districts of Birchwood, Cherry Grove, and Pinedale belong to a consortium that provides CRP training to new teachers in the district annually as well as to current staff through the use of book studies and guest speakers. Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben provide in-district professional development centered on CRP and also engage with outside organizations who meet to discuss issues of equity and diversity in school systems. These actions demonstrate these leaders beliefs about the need to develop cultural competence among staff to better understand the diverse needs of their student populations.

While not specific to CRP training, Dr. Harris, Dr. Thomas and Dr. Green similarly demonstrate a “commitment to their own learning and the learning of others” (Theoharis, 2009, p.142). For example, the professional learning provided to staff centers on data analysis and problem solving for individual students to support improved learning outcomes. In other words, they want to build an understanding among their teachers of how to best support the learning of all students, learning that can be marked and charted with data.

Dr. Davis, Dr. Dunn, Dr. Thomas, Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben further demonstrate CRP leader dispositions in their work with efforts to increase engagement with the families of Black students in their district. Their development of parent groups and events specific to Black families, along with identifying ways to close the knowledge gap for Black families, illustrates their belief in a “holistic approach to working with students and families” (Theoharis, 2009, p.142). Involvement by the districts of Oak Park and Tamarack with local organizations like the food pantries, religious groups and universities to pursue additional supports for Black students demonstrates their commitment to “engaging with the community” (Theoharis, 2009).

Leaders possessing CRP disposition also create higher likelihood of implementing system changes in their schools to address the opportunity gaps that currently exist for Black students. These types of leaders believe all students can experience success and that the creation of equitable and supportive environment of learning will provide that success (Bondy, Ross, Gallingsane & Hambacher, 2007; Gay, 2010; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Theoharis, 2009; Ware, 2006). As is the case with the eight superintendents in this study, the ability to foster changes to close opportunity gaps for Black students may require a

disposition in alignment with Culturally Responsive Practices in order to effectively recognize and address the root causes.

### **Leader disposition in relation to Critical Race Theory.**

The ability of the leaders to reflect and think critically about the school structures in which they operate connects to a key concept of Critical Race Theory: the permanence of racism (Decuir & Dixon, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Dr. Davis, Dr. Harris, Dr. Green, and Ms. Wilson each cited how traditional models of education and its tracking system had led to an increase of Black students at the remedial level or had prevented teachers from individualizing instruction. Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben both described issues in which teachers did not encourage Black students or inform Black families on how to enroll in advanced placement courses. The stories described by the superintendents about systems of tracking and a lack of communication and encouragement towards Black families to access upper level courses demonstrated the racism embedded in the social structures of the school. That White students made up the majority of upper level courses or tracks and that they had far fewer issues of access in the school system demonstrates how Whiteness in these districts yielded greater access to success and opportunity (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Through their critique of the current system structures the leaders of this study demonstrated dispositions that were able to recognize the permanence of racism, its implications, and what they needed to enact in order to create equitable learning environments for Black students.

### **Equity-based Actions of Superintendents Making a Difference**

The superintendents in this study each told stories about the actions they took or attempted to take to develop environments of equity for Black students in their districts. Their



actions revealed a focus on increasing levels of engagement among a range of stakeholders to benefit Black students. Their stories share their determination to create greater engagement with Black students and families in the school environment, to improve how teachers engaged with Black students through their instructional practices and classroom management, and to increase engagement with the community around the systemic inequities existing in the district for Black students. Table 5.2 provides a summary of the identified actions taken by each superintendent who sought to make a difference in the learning opportunities for Black students.

*Table 5.3 Superintendents' actions to support equity*

<b>Actions to Support Equity by Superintendent</b>	<b>Dr. James Davis</b>	<b>Dr. Harold Dunn</b>	<b>Dr. John Harris</b>	<b>Dr. Mary Green</b>	<b>Dr. Gregory Jones</b>	<b>Ms. Erica Wilson</b>	<b>Dr. Joseph Thomas</b>	<b>Dr. Mark Greben</b>
Meet students' poverty needs					X			
Early access to ed/Pre-k outreach	X		X					
Environment of High Expectations	X		X		X			
Caring Teacher /Student Relationships	X							
Increase Student/ Family Engagement	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Teacher Growth Mindset		X	X	X		X		X
Teacher capacity to support all learners				X	X	X		
Teachers as problem solvers/continuous improvement cycle			X	X	X	X		
Embedding Culturally Responsive Practices	X				X	X		X
Eliminating racial bias in school system	X		X	X	X			X
Recruiting a more diverse education staff	X				X			X

Table 5.4 categorizes the types of actions taken by the superintendents in this study and provides definitions for each category.

Table 5.4 *Summary of Actions of Superintendents as Difference Makers*

<b>Action</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Engagement with Black Families	Providing opportunities for Black families to have equity in voice within the schools (ex. Family support groups, school events for Black families, community visitations)
Increased access to educational opportunities	Increased enrollment of Black students to Advanced Placement Courses, closing of remedial tracks
Culturally Responsive Training	Seminars and conferences to support education around CRP for teachers and students, book studies about race/hidden curriculum, guest speakers and partnerships with local universities
Education of stakeholders on Equitable Practices	Presentations to the school board on opportunity gaps for Black students, data reviews of gaps in learning for Black students, education on impact of poverty on learning

### **Stories of leader actions to increase engagement with stakeholders.**

The leaders' actions reflect a desire to increase engagement between the school community and Black families. The stories of Dr. Harris, Dr. Jones, Dr. Green and Dr. Greben emphasized academic engagement of students through examples of how they worked to increase Black student engagement in the classroom. Dr. Harris shut down remedial courses which had funneled many Black students out of the general education courses, and Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben pushed for increased enrollment of Black students into advanced placement courses. Dr. Green similarly created a learning environment that promoted more engagement of Black students. The training provided to teachers to assess and individualize instruction for students meant that schools did not have to offer ability based classroom settings. Her push for individualized instruction helped to build a more inclusive learning environment. By closing

certain tracks and opening access to new ones, Black students in these districts could begin to experience similar levels of access to curriculum and rigor as their White peers.

Dr. Davis, Dr. Dunn, Ms. Wilson and Dr. Thomas emphasized relational engagement with Black families and shared stories of efforts to reach out to the community and invite the community into the schools. Schools in Dr. Davis' district hosted family nights aimed specifically at getting to know the Black families attending the district, their questions, concerns and how best to support them. Similarly, the Cherry Grove district under the direction of Dr. Dunn helped to develop and maintain a Black family support group which provides a space for families to voice their needs and share their ideas with the school community. Dr. Wilson pushed for school teams to invite parents into discussions on how best to support struggling students in the district. Dr. Thomas, acknowledging that many families in the district did not have access to regular school communications, brought the school information to their homes by holding face to face group meetings. Each leader's effort to build relationships and engage with Black families opened opportunities for the families and students to have a safe outlet and stronger voice in the majority White educational communities.

The actions among these leaders also reflected a desire to increase engagement between teachers and Black students. The districts of Dr. Davis, Dr. Dunn, Ms. Wilson, Dr. Jones and Greben all provided varied levels of learning to teachers on how to engage with students of color using Culturally Responsive Instructional Practices. Dr. Davis, Dr. Dunn and Ms. Wilson belonged to a local consortium that provided professional learning on Culturally Responsive Classroom Practices. New teachers attended a two day CRP learning session at the start of the year to assure that all new staff entering the district would have at least introductory knowledge of these classroom practices and the expectation by the district to use them. They also utilized

the consortium to bring in expert speakers in the field of CRP to train current staff. Dr. Dunn, Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben also provided CRP courses and book studies throughout the school year that engaged staff in reflection and conversation around the impact of race and culture on learning.

Dr. Dunn also acknowledged that many instances of negative engagement between White teachers and Black students existed in the district, which resulted in disproportionate levels of discipline for those students. He recognized that the high levels of discipline and severe consequences for Black students set upon them by teachers contributed to learning gaps for Black students. As a result, Dr. Dunn took the challenging step to confront the disciplinary practices of those teachers with a pattern of assigning tougher and more consequences to Black students. He engaged these teachers and their principals in conversations around how to develop respectful relationships with students and to plan lessons to engage students and reduce negative behaviors.

Dr. Harris and Dr. Green focused on the development of inclusive practices as a means to increase teacher engagement with students. Both shared how they taught their teachers to utilize a continuous improvement cycle to gather student feedback and data to inform instructional strategies that would individualize instruction for students. These leaders believed that when teachers had a clear understanding of each student's strengths and weaknesses that they could create more engaging lessons for students as well as respond to their needs in real time. They also saw these actions to train teachers on continuous improvement as a way to help all teachers own responsibility for all students regardless of the student's ability level.

In addition to developing increased engagement with Black families and their interactions with teachers, several leaders took action towards engaging the community in conversations

about inequities faced by Black students. Dr. Dunn brought to light in his community the issue of disproportionate levels of discipline for Black students. He shared his discussions with Black families to understand their concerns around the discipline practices in the classroom. He also worked with the school board to educate them on the issue of how often Black students received more severe consequences for behavior similar to White peers who received lesser consequences.

Like Dr. Dunn, Dr. Jones, Ms. Wilson, and Dr. Greben engaged their school boards in discussions around opportunity gaps and inequities for Black students. They described how they and the district's principals provided presentations to the board and community that demonstrated opportunity gaps in the district's academic and participation data and their efforts to close them. Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben have also engaged their board members in book studies specific to issues of racism and poverty in the educational setting.

The actions of these eight leaders, shared in their stories, reflected their recognition not only around the need for engagement in the process of creating equitable environments, but also the need for engagement of all stakeholders to move the process forward. Their actions reflect a multi-level approach to change within their organizations and a recognition of the need to take a system-wide approach in order to eliminate the many layers of underlying causes of the opportunity gaps.

### **Leader actions in relation to Culturally Responsive Practices.**

An analysis of the actions taken by the leaders in the research on Culturally Responsive Practices compared to the actions taken by the leaders in this study revealed varying degrees of similarity based upon the political climate of the district and the leaders' tenure as superintendent. Namely, the actions of the superintendents in the districts with moderate to

liberal political leanings appear to have implemented more actions aligned with those found in the research on Culturally Responsive Practice and Leadership compared to superintendents working in moderate to conservative leaning districts. In the moderate to conservative districts, superintendents' actions reflected technical and data focused solutions to support students and staff more so than solutions requiring reflection on the influence of race and culture on learning.

***Examining actions taken to address gaps in moderate to liberal districts.***

The findings around how leaders in the moderate to liberal leaning districts of Birchwood, Cherry Grove, Oak Park, Pinedale and Tamarack took action to close gaps demonstrated several parallels the actions taken by teachers and principals in the research on Culturally Responsive Practices. The majority of their actions aimed to support students in the classroom aligned to raising expectations, improving relationships, and increasing engagement. Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben took action to raise expectations for Black students in their districts by creating greater encouragement and recruitment of Black students to advanced placement level or honors coursework. This action aligned to the description of teacher and leader dispositions around Culturally Responsive Practices that involve staff members holding high expectations for Black students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morrison, et. al). Holding high expectations also plays a role in how teachers and leaders establish relationships with students.

Dr. Davis and Dr. Dunn stressed the need to strengthen relationships with Black students and families in order to support their success. Dr. Davis sought to develop or hire teachers that demonstrated caring relationships and a passion to reach all students. In Cherry Grove, Dr. Dunn examined ways to reduce disproportionate issues of discipline for Black students confronting teachers with apparent racial bias in their discipline practices, engaging them in reflection and

supporting them to develop lessons that engaged all types of learners. The actions of Dr. Davis and Dr. Dunn to improve relationships between teachers and students aligned with research connecting CRP to student growth and achievement. In studies of Black students who identified the qualities of teachers who best supported their learning, they cited caring teachers who built relationships and created a sense of community as key components of their success (Howard, 2001; Wiggan, 2008). The work by Dr. Dunn and Dr. Davis demonstrate a recognition of the importance of teachers and staff building strong relationships with students and families to support student learning.

The leaders in the moderate to liberal leaning districts also recognized the need for teachers to adjust their instructional practices in response to the varied cultures of students in the classroom and their background knowledge. Dr. Davis and Dr. Dunn each expressed concern around a lack of relational connection between some teaching staff and Black students in the classroom due to cultural or racial bias. They described how this lack of connection resulted in lowered student engagement with the learning in the classroom and higher incidences of negative behavior. Dr. Davis, Dr. Jones, Ms. Wilson and Dr. Greben all explained how their new staff and current staff engaged in diversity and culturally responsive training to address this bias through work with local consortiums, University professors and nationally recognized organizations like the Pacific Education Group and the National Equity Project. Literature around the actions of culturally responsive teachers describes practices that involve building upon students' background knowledge, identifying texts that reflect the culture and race of the students in the classroom and designing a classroom space with visuals that similarly reflect of the students within it (Gay, 2002; Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008; Rychly & Graves, 2012). Gay (2002) and Howard (2010) also stress the importance of the teacher aligning his or

her communication style in the classroom with the various styles of the students. The stories shared about their teaching staff and the actions they took to support their staff and students demonstrated how Dr. Davis, Dr. Jones, Ms. Wilson and Dr. Greben recognized the importance of incorporating students' cultures in to their instructional practices and lessons. These leaders' actions reflect a prioritization of the education of their staff around understanding the impact of race and culture on the learning environment.

Several leaders recognized not only the importance of engaging teachers in learning and conversations about race and culture, but also the importance of engaging students in these conversations. Dr. Davis, Dr. Dunn, Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben provided examples of how they identified groups and spaces in which Black students in their district could engage in equity and racial conversations. They all provided opportunities for their students to attend summits and networking opportunities with Black students from the neighboring areas and the state to engage in discussions around racial bias and key supports for their learning in schools. The literature around CRP actions in leadership describe leaders who engage teachers in conversations about race, who develop clubs to provide opportunities for students to engage in equity discussions and who engage the community in similar discussions (Johnson, 2006; Normore & Gaetane, 2007). The descriptions of actions by the leaders in the moderate to liberal districts reflect a greater openness to discuss culturally responsive staff training and activities and clubs to specifically engage and build relationships with Black students.

### ***Examining actions taken to address gaps in moderate to conservative districts.***

While an analysis of the findings around the superintendents' dispositions suggests that all eight leaders possessed attitudes and beliefs in alignment with Culturally Responsive theory, the actions of leaders in moderate to conservative districts demonstrated alignment to a lesser



degree. Rather than describing actions to close gaps related to cultural or racial bias in the school system, leaders in these districts explained their actions as they related to data driven processes identifying areas of need.

Of all of the superintendents studied, Dr. Green used the terms of race and culture least as she described her actions to close gaps. She detailed how the teachers in her district continuously solicited student feedback on their learning and, in turn, used it and other assessment data to individualize instruction to support student growth. This process built upon students' background knowledge and identified resources that aligned to the student's individual needs. Although process described by Dr. Green is similar, the actions described by some CRP research, her description was devoid of common CRP terminology (Morrison et. al, 2008). Furthermore, Dr. Green's description did not provide evidence that teachers incorporated imagery, texts or communication in the classroom setting that aligned to any particular cultural group as is described in the CRP research on teacher actions (Gay, 2002; Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008; Rychly & Graves, 2012).

In terms of staff and system development Dr. Harris, Dr. Green and Dr. Thomas did not cite specific instances in which they created student specific groups focused on social justice or equity issues or instances in which their staff underwent training aligned to CRP. Dr. Green did, however, describe how her district worked to grow extra-curricular opportunities based on students' interests in order to increase engagement with the school community. While this action demonstrated a response to the cultural needs of the students, she again did not comment on the subject of race, culture or equity in her need for varied co-curricular programming.

Dr. Green and Dr. Harris each explained how they provided training for staff around how to problem solve, individualize instruction, develop inclusive practices and solicit student feedback. Unlike the leaders in the moderate to liberal districts, the professional development offerings in the conservative districts did not appear to incorporate discussions around the impact of race and issues of equity actions aligned with the research around Culturally Relevant Leadership (Normore & Gaetane, 2007). A potential rationale for the variances to CRP aligned actions taken by leaders in conservative districts compared to leaders in liberal districts may involve the political environments of each district.

### **Equity-based Superintendents and the District's Political Climate: Supports and Tensions**

The descriptions of the challenges faced by each of the leaders in the study in their ability to close gaps and build equitable learning spaces are, to a large degree, tied to community factors. An analysis of the findings around these challenges points to the political leanings of the district, as well as the racial make-up and longevity of the superintendents. Each had an impact on the leaders' ability to develop greater support for Black students. These factors helped to explain the differences observed in the actions taken by the eight leaders to develop environments of equity. Table 5.5 summarizes the types of actions taken by superintendents as they relate to the political climate of the district.

*Table 5.5. Leader-identified political climate and actions to support equity*

<b>Actions to Support Equity by Superintendent</b>	<b>Liberal</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Conservative</b>
Meet students' poverty needs	X		
Early access to ed/Pre-k outreach	X		X
Environment of High Expectations	X	X	X
Caring Teacher /Student Relationships		X	
Increase Student/ Family Engagement	X	X	X

Teacher Growth Mindset	X	X	X
Teacher capacity to support all learners	X	X	
Teachers as problem solvers/continuous improvement cycle	X	X	X
Embedding Culturally Responsive Practices	X		
Eliminating racial bias in school system	X	X	
Recruiting a more diverse education staff	X	X	

### **Leaders' stories on the influence of the political environments.**

Dr. Dunn, Dr. Davis, Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben described their districts as liberal or liberal to moderate in terms of the political climate. Their stakeholders, at least on the surface, described themselves as embracing diversity in their schools and communities. Although leaders like Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben cited incidences in which the community members' rhetoric of embracing diversity did not coincide with their actions, the general political environment appeared to provide a greater opening through which the superintendents could hold discussions about race, equity and culturally responsive practices. Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben shared examples of how they brought in speakers to educate their school board members on issues of race. Both leaders also added district equity coordinators or directors to lead work on culturally relevant practices. They could also spend district money and hire national organizations and local equity experts to provide professional learning to staff around culturally responsive practices. Dr. Dunn and Dr. Davis, although to a lesser degree, have also partnered with local organizations to lead professional development on culturally responsive practices for teachers. The liberal leanings of the community may provide an explanation as to why these four leaders appear to have implemented more system-wide CRP changes despite the conclusion that all eight leaders possess similar dispositions in alignment with CRP.

Dr. Harris, Dr. Green and Dr. Thomas served in districts with moderate to conservative views. Dr. Green did not cite barriers to closing gaps in her district, nor did she take an explicit approach to addressing issues of gaps by race or based on equity. Her stance throughout the interview focused on the solutions to address gaps through the implementation of a continuous improvement cycle. This focus on terminology around individualized instruction, problem solving and continuous improvement may have allowed her to provide supports specific to the needs of the Black student population while avoiding contentious conversations about race and pushback from conservative stakeholders. At the same time, Dr. Green raised concern in her interview that CRP was simply a new label for the type of individualized instruction towards which her district was working. Thus, her educational philosophy focused on continuous improvement and a systems perspective, rather than the political environment itself could also provide the best explanation for the actions she took to address gaps.

Conservative politics also provide a possible rationale for the limited CRP actions by Dr. Harris and Dr. Thomas. Both leaders shared stories of how their school board members would not hear discussions about race or multicultural education when addressing the district's student needs. In Spruceland, Dr. Thomas eventually left his position to work with a more diverse and liberal educational system. In Hickory Hills, Dr. Harris continued to take steps towards creating equity for his Black students by shutting down remedial classes and providing professional development to staff on how to identify student learning supports based on data. He stated, however, that most of this work to address the needs of Black students was done in a covert manner, rephrasing conversations or renaming strategies to convey a message of cultural or racial responsiveness and avoid pushback from his school board and other community members.

For these two leaders, the district's political leanings seem to provide the best argument for why their actions were not aligned to CRP to the same degree as their dispositions would suggest

The story of the Maple Leaf District, as told by Dr. Green, distinguished itself from the other districts' political environment. Dr. Green's description of her community was one of steadfast support for the changes in which she was enacting. Her verbiage that the district sought to individualize instruction for all and have "all students thrive" through their continuous improvement cycle may point to the strong stakeholder buy in and minimal pushback to change. The likelihood of a parent arguing against a leader seeking to customize the educational process for their child seems minimal.

Additionally, the population and historical performance levels of the district could explain the low level of pushback Dr. Green experienced. While the Maple Leaf School District falls under the descriptor of being a high performing district, compared to the other districts in the study, its academic performance levels for the last few decades were lower on average, but trending upward. Dr. Green described her district as being blue collar and middle to upper class. Most parents work in manufacturing and have less experience attending post-secondary institutions. Although they themselves lack post-secondary educational experience, they value education and experience for their own children.

Their lack of experience with these post-secondary school systems coupled with the desire to see their children go to college may result in their need to place greater trust and reliance on the educators in their school district to support that desire. The parents in Maple Leaf may view educators as more "expert" in their ability to provide a quality education for their children, which would allow the district greater freedom to implement the changes it felt

necessary to support student growth. The other leaders in the study described their parent populations as highly educated and the districts as having many affluent neighborhoods. The data from the other seven districts also indicated decades of high academic performance coming out of the schools (MidwesternDash).

Dr. Green also indicated that she often engages community and board members in the same professional learning as her teaching staff. Multiyear symposiums offered by the district update community members on the professional learning and changes in the district and invite them into classrooms to provide a level of transparency. These actions allow members to see how the work facilitated by Dr. Green supports learning. This level of education and openness with the community may also explain the lack of pushback to change in the Maple Leaf District compared to other districts in the study.

### **Environmental connections with Critical Race Theory.**

Regardless of the political leanings of the district, all leaders, with the exception of Dr. Green, shared a common environmental challenge to their creation of an equitable environment for Black students: a majority White and privileged community. This challenge identified by the leaders of the study ties closely to the components of Whiteness as property and interest convergence within Critical Race Theory (Decuir & Dixon, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

All eight districts exist in majority White communities. For the districts of Birchwood, Hickory Hills and Pinedale most of their Black student populations reside outside of the district and attend as a result of the integration program. All of the superintendents, with the exception of Dr. Green, described examples of how the majority White community members pushed back or questioned the leadership when changes occurred that threaten the educational privileges they

enjoyed. Critical Race Theory identifies instances like these through the principle of interest convergence. Milner (2008) explains, “Interest convergence stresses that racial equality and equity for people of color will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of Whites” (p.333). In other words, the leaders in this study may have experienced pushback from the majority White community because the community did not view the changes to create equity in the district as adding value to their own lives.

Milner (2008) goes on to explain the difficulty behind implementing changes to support equity in majority White communities:

Inherent in the interest-convergent principle are matters of loss and gain; typically, someone or some group, often the dominant group, has to negotiate and give up something in order for interests to converge or align (Bell, 1980; Donnor, 2005 as cited in Milner, 2008, pp.333-334).

The stories shared by Dr. Jones and Dr. Greben about the anger and frustration expressed by White parents when they pushed to enroll more Black students in advanced placement courses provides a clear example of the loss and gain through interest convergence described by Milner (2008). A story from Dr. Davis also illustrated issues of interest convergence when he discussed community backlash against his hiring of more intervention specialists. Dr. Davis recognized the need to provide more resources to his Black students to address skill deficits, but the White community saw this as a loss in resources for their own students in terms class size or the addition of more enrichment programming. They felt that they were giving up high expectations, teacher support and more importantly, a course that felt catered to their race and class by having more students of color enroll.

One must similarly consider the role that interest convergence (Milner, 2008) plays in terms of the actions taken by superintendents in this study related to the environments in which they work. Within the moderate to conservative districts Dr. Green did not engage in discussion around race or causes of gaps, but rather focused almost exclusively on the continuous improvement cycle she was implementing in the district. Dr. Harris and Dr. Thomas both stated that their school boards would not engage in conversations about race and equity and as a possible result, these leaders did not describe actions to implement culturally responsive practices in the district, to challenge the status quo as it related to racial equity, or to recruit more diverse staff. Perhaps for the sake of self-preservation to maintain their role as district leader, these leaders may not have viewed those actions as operating in their own self-interest and thus racial equity was not pursued through those means.

On the opposite end, within the more liberal to moderate districts, leaders like Dr. Greben, Dr. Dunn, Dr. Davis, Dr. Jones and Dr. Wilson all engaged in actions around the implementation of Culturally Responsive Practices, challenging the status quo as it related to race and the recruitment of a more diverse staff. While each leader described how these actions benefited the learning of their Black student population, one must also consider how these actions also benefit the leaders themselves. The concept of interest convergence (Milner, 2008) is also reflected in these superintendents' actions in that if they can close the achievement gaps for Black students in their district through the closure of opportunity gaps, they may receive local and state recognition for their work, recognition by the educational community, increased pay, and increased future job opportunities. Thus the motivation to pursue certain actions around creating equity requires deeper examination.



The issues of White Privilege in the superintendents' school and community environments also ties into the CRT principle of Whiteness as property. Whiteness as property involves an understanding of how being White yields greater access to success and opportunity. (Decuir & Dixon, 2004; Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998). For Dr. Dunn in Cherry Grove Whiteness as property revealed itself through discipline systems in the schools in which White students receive lesser consequences than Black students for similar offenses. He cited examples of how certain White teachers used discriminatory discipline practices as a means to remove Black students from their classes, reducing their opportunity to learn.

The pushback observed by Dr. Davis, Dr. Harris, Dr. Jones, Ms. Wilson, Dr. Thomas and Dr. Greben related to their actions to eliminate tracking systems also reflects the principle of Whiteness as property. These leaders sought to eliminate tracking because they identified a pattern in which the school system placed the majority of White students into the regular and upper level educational tracks and the majority of Black students into the remedial tracks. Under this system, Whiteness again yielded more opportunities for success. In this study, the majority White community populations that seek to hold onto systems that have traditionally given them an advantage over people of color poses a major barrier to superintendents' abilities to implement change that would benefit the learning of Black students and create systems of equity.

### **Looking ahead: The Study's Implications for Superintendents, Preparation Programs and Future Research**

This study tells the stories of eight superintendents who demonstrated a desire and determination to create a more effective and positive learning environment for Black students and for all students. For superintendents and aspiring superintendents seeking to do the same,

this study has several implications involving leadership dispositions, identification of the most effective course of action and how to navigate and communicate in challenging environments.

**Implications for the professional learning and preparation of current and future superintendents.**

The stories from this study paint an image of eight district leaders with a passion to build school systems of equity for all students. These leaders engaged in reflective practices and operated as critical thinkers allowing them to look at issues beyond opportunity gaps and to see systemic problems like racial bias and access issues that perpetuated low success rates for Black students. These leaders also demonstrated a willingness to take risks like closing down track systems or challenging teacher discipline practices to close create equity for Black students. These dispositions align with the dispositions of leaders and teachers in the research on Culturally Responsive practices. They are reflected in how they reinforced high expectations for students by increasing enrollment to advanced course options, pushed for more inclusive environments by eliminating tracks and educated those around them on Culturally Responsive Practices and the impact of race on learning through book studies, courses and consortiums. Further these leaders recognized a key principle of Critical Race Theory, the permanence of racism, within their system in their identification of access to upper level coursework, access to extra-curricular activities and disparities in classroom discipline between White and Black students.

The dispositions that describe the leaders in this study, and in those around CRP, may be key to ensuring that other districts can begin to implement the work needed to develop environments of equity. In order to address gaps in a system, district leaders must possess a level of awareness around opportunity gaps and not just achievement gaps. They need to develop an

understanding of all the contributing factors to gaps in order to implement change to address those factors.

As the definition of disposition implies, the attitudes and beliefs of an individual are generally inherent or permanent. Dispositions develop as humans move from childhood to adulthood and often stagnant in adulthood barring a major life-changing experience. Not all current superintendents may possess the right disposition to create equity. In order to assure that future superintendents do possess the passion to implement equity based school systems, education programs must look to develop these attitudes and belief early on in an educator's career and reinforce them up through superintendent preparation programs.

All educator preparation programs, including those for superintendency, should include coursework that addresses the underlying causes of opportunity gaps in school systems for marginalized student populations. Programs should encourage ongoing reflection and engage students in critical conversations around the influence of race and culture especially as it relates to Critical Race Theory. These programs should provide opportunities for future leaders to question educational practices and systems to understand how they support or impair learning opportunities for groups of students.

Connected to knowledge around effective practices to address opportunity gaps is how to implement them. The leaders of this study shared stories of how they took action to create greater engagement of students and families, how they developed engagement between teachers and students and how they engaged community members in discussions about equity. Many of these actions, like creating equity oriented environments and outlets for students, and engaging staff in training to individualize instruction and develop lessons tied to students' cultural

backgrounds connect with CRP research addressing the actions of teachers and leaders.

Educator and superintendent preparation program should seek to embed courses specific to how teachers and leaders enact culturally responsive practices across multiple levels of a school and district organizations.

While leadership preparation programs generally include coursework for transforming organizations, they may not all include lessons on navigating political or racially charged environments when implementing change. The leaders of this study cited issues of White privilege and politics as major barriers to closing opportunity gaps for Black students. Several leaders shared stories of their inability to present to their boards the existing data on opportunity gaps for students of color in the district. Others described the constant questioning from White families about allowing Black students into advanced level courses or about providing more resources to Black students. These same stories reflect interest convergence and Whiteness as property, both key components of CRT; components that can only be addressed by leaders with equity-minded dispositions. As such, current superintendents seeking to build equity and future superintendents should engage in learning around strategic communication with stakeholders in racially biased and politically charged environments. They also need the skills to serve as instructional leaders as they may need to educate stakeholders about opportunity gaps resulting from race and how to close them.

Related to supporting the communication skills of superintendents, preparation programs for superintendents should increase focus on how superintendents develop relationships with their school boards. Leaders like Dr. Harris, Dr. Greben, Dr. Jones and Dr. Thomas each described the challenges of engaging the board in conversations about race, equity and gaps in learning. Preparation programs should focus on how superintendents might manage their board

rather than being managed by their board in order to improve their ability to implement changes that are in the best interest of the student population. They need understanding of how to educate their board and walk into crucial conversations that allow both the board and the superintendents to propel the organization forward. Superintendents who are successful at managing and building relationships with their board will likely have greater success at challenging the status quo of the school system to the benefit of students of color.

Current and aspiring superintendents seeking to close gaps, might also consider mentor or network support. Based on the findings of this study, superintendents who work in liberal, moderate or conservative districts, may face resistance from stakeholders to implement changes that serve to close gaps for Black students. A veteran superintendent or a network of leaders may provide insight based on past or current experience on how to implement these changes strategically. They might also provide emotional support during challenging times.

Beyond what coursework can offer, aspiring superintendents seeking to close opportunity gaps need mental and emotional preparedness. The work to implement environments of equity, especially in majority White districts, involves a level of risk. As the leaders of this study demonstrated, discussions about race and removing elements of White privilege from school systems elicits emotional and often negative responses from teachers, school board members, and members of the community. Even with the best communication skills, an angered board or community still has the power to terminate its relationship with the superintendent. Aspiring superintendents need to recognize and feel comfortable in the knowledge that their role may last only two to five years depending on the make-up and turnover of the board.

### **Implications for future research.**

Research on superintendents implementing change to address opportunity gaps at the district level remains sparse. The stories of these superintendents demonstrate a need to examine the impact of leadership disposition as it relates to implementing systems of equity to confirm the qualities identified in this study and in the research on CRP. The stories also reveal actions focused on multiple levels of engagement with students, between teachers and students, and with community members around the subjects of culture, race and individualized instruction. Leaders like Dr. Green and Dr. Harris have created successful inroads to developing environments of equity and yet they have implemented actions that align to a lesser degree with the actions taken by leaders in CRP research compared to others leaders in the study. Future studies may need to explore the impact of practices similar to these leaders who have invested in a continuous improvement process and weigh the impact of these actions against those of CRP research.

Finally, the leaders all described issues in which the political leanings of the district and/or issues of White privilege threatened their ability to implement change. Some leaders like Dr. Harris engaged in a more covert process to support Black students to avoid community and board pushback. In Dr. Thomas' case the school board's stance that he not discuss students of color, student in poverty and other gaps in the system may have contributed to his decision to leave the district. Given the high turnover rates, research should look at how superintendent preparation and ongoing professional development offer supports to help superintendents navigate challenging issues, address pushback, create buy in and implement change. Research studies may also want to further examine how superintendents develop relationships with board members, educate members and create buy in to change, especially around more controversial topics in more conservative districts.

This Midwestern state's Black student population is in crisis based upon the limited opportunities for success both in urban as well as in high performing suburban schools (Annie E Casey, 2014). The eight superintendents in this study, however, provide hope to the current state of affairs. There are leaders in this state willing to take the risks necessary to challenge long held systems of White Privilege in order to increase learning opportunities for Black students. There are leaders in the state with a passion to build learning environments that create equity for all students. These are the types of leaders that we need to study and grow if we hope to change the trajectory for our Black students and propel our state forward.

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